

A wide-ranging partnership

By H.E. MARK CLAYTON

HER MAJESTY'S AMBASSADOR TO GEORGIA



MARK CLAYTON has been Her Majesty's Ambassador to Georgia since 2020. Prior to this, he has served as Deputy High Commissioner to Bangladesh from 2014-17 as well as Deputy Head of the FC0's Counter-Terrorism Department from 2010-2014. He has completed postings in Kabul and Moscow, and has also worked as Head of the International Team in the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism in the Home Office.

No matter where in the world I have worked, it has been an honour to represent my country overseas. But I can think of few places where it is better to be Ambassador than Georgia, as it celebrates its 30th anniversary of independence.

The roots of the UK's relations with Georgia reach back into the past. Douglas Freshfield's books about his travels in Georgia helped raise Georgia's profile with a British audience in the middle of the 19th century. And of course through their translations of Georgia's classic literature the wonderful work of Oliver and Marjory Wardrop did much to bring the richness of Georgia's culture to life for English-speakers. It was this experience that led to Sir Oliver Wardrop being appointed as the first British Chief Commissioner of the Transcaucasus, when the UK first established diplomatic relations in 1919.

Sadly the UK presence in Georgia ended with the Bolshevik Invasion in 1921, although Sir Oliver continued his life-long love for Georgia, including through support to the Wardrop collection of Georgian material at the Bodleian library in Oxford. Sir Oliver and Marjory Wardrop's enthusiasm for building closer ties between the UK and Georgia is honoured today through our continuing "*Wardrop Dialogue*", the annual formal strategic dialogue between the UK and Georgia.

Ties between the UK and Georgian people began to

be re-established in the late Soviet period – twinning relations between Bristol and Tbilisi were launched in 1988, and between Newport and Kutaisi in 1989, while the formal re-establishment of diplomatic relations took place in 1992. From the very earliest days the UK established itself as a strong supporter of Georgia's independence, its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Since then, Georgia has lived through some significant challenges. But throughout the 30 years since independence, the UK's support has remained steadfast. And our partnership has gone from strength to strength.

Today, the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Georgia, which came into force in January 2021, forms the bedrock of our bilateral relations. It covers the breadth and depth of our bilateral cooperation, in all fields from defence and security to people to people links.

The UK's relations with Georgia are particularly strong in the field of security and defence. Having fought together in Afghanistan, our troops are well practised in working together in tough circumstances. The UK is at the forefront of NATO's support to Georgia's NATO membership plans. We stand by the commitment made in Bucharest in 2008, that Georgia will one day become a member of the alliance. And we continue to lead by example in delivering on that promise, from leading the drive to develop the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package in 2014, to delivering practical support on a daily basis through both NATO and UK national channels. Importantly, and particularly key in an age of hybrid warfare, the UK is working closely with Georgia on cyber-security and countering disinformation.

The UK remains committed to supporting Georgia in finding a long term, substantive resolution of its protracted conflicts. While remaining steadfast in our support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, we continue to support a range of practical measures aimed at delivering practical humanitarian assistance to those living in the conflict affected areas, and fund a range of conflict management and peace-building projects to support the Georgian government's efforts to engage and reconcile communities split by conflict.

Support for Georgia's continued democratic



The title page of the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the United Kingdom and Georgia

progress remains in many respects at the heart of the UK's relationship with Georgia. We maintain strong, vibrant relations across the political spectrum in Georgia, and engage regularly with all parties to encourage them to overcome polarisation and secure the consensus needed to tackle Georgia's remaining challenges. This is also essential to deliver progress towards the EU and NATO membership the Georgian people want. We continue to invest in Georgia's public administration, to ensure that it remains able to develop policies and then deliver them in a way that meets people's needs.

Throughout all we do the UK remains a strong advocate of respect for human rights and gender equality. Although Georgia has made good progress in many areas, more remains to be done to support equal rights and opportunities for all, to promote and empower female leaders, and to promote tolerance, in particular for the LGBTQ+ community. The UK is proud to fly the rainbow flag in Tbilisi during Pride, and we look forward to a strong Georgian delegation at the UK's "Safe to be me" conference later this year. This would be a strong show of support for the rights of Georgia's LGBTQ+ community, a particularly important signal following the violence and disruption that blighted last year's Pride in Tbilisi.

Trade and Economic relations will remain an important element in our relationship. The United Kingdom is one of the most significant investors in Georgia's economy. Total trade in goods and services between the United Kingdom and Georgia amounted to £196 million for the year to mid 2021, representing an increase of 16.7 per cent over the previous year. Total exports to Georgia were £152 million in the year to mid 2021 and mark an increase of 11.8 per cent.

Underpinning all of the above are strong and wide-

ranging links between the UK and Georgian people. Through the British Council's work with the Ministry of Education we are supporting a transformation in English language skills among Georgia's teachers of English. This is bolstered by a wide-ranging programme of English language teaching delivered by the Council itself, alongside the provision of UK examinations services, allowing Georgian students to access both the very best of English language teaching, together with the opportunity to gain internationally recognised qualifications in a range of subjects. This is complemented by a wide range of scholarships supported by the UK Government, which gives the very best Georgian students the ability to further their learning in the UK. We are working to create viable career pathways for young people in the arts, supporting cultural leaders, contributing to Culture and Creative Industry policymaking, and brokering new partnerships between arts organisations in the UK and Georgia.

Yet more could be said about the thriving relations between the UK and Georgian people. In any number of fields – from tourism and travel, to academic research, and through our vibrant twinning associations – the UK's links with Georgia are going from strength to strength.

Georgia and the UK have achieved much together in the first 30 years of Georgia's independence. And I remain optimistic about the future. For the first time in a long time Georgia has a period ahead of it without the distraction of elections. This is a key opportunity for Georgia's political leadership to pull together and make progress on a wide range of areas where progress is essential if Georgia is to meet its objectives of EU and NATO membership. The UK will be there, alongside Georgia, every step of the way. 

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The Port of Batumi is the largest container, ferry and general cargo seaport in Georgia