

# Forging strong UK-Georgia ties

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JONATHAN DJANOGLY is the Chairman of the APPG on Georgia and has been the Conservative Party Member of Parliament for Huntingdon since 2001. He has also served as Secretary of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Corporate Governance and Joint Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Corporate Responsibility, and from 2010-2012 he was Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Courts and Legal Aid. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Law and Politics and was admitted as a solicitor in 1990.

Relations between the United Kingdom and Georgia have never been better and the prospects for our two countries to create even closer ties are bright.

It is of note that post-Brexit, when the UK started its process of recreating trade deals with the dozens of countries that had signed deals with the EU, it was Georgia that signed up first ahead of the pack. This showed the success of diplomatic interaction and developments under the “*Wardrop dialogue*” initiative over recent years. Indeed, as part of this initiative, the dialogue was extended beyond Ministers to the Parliamentary level and meetings now take place between our respective legislators. Furthermore, Georgian civil servants visit Whitehall to learn how the UK system works and Georgian legislators have visited to learn how our Parliamentary Committee system works.

At 30, Georgia is a young democracy, but one which has been keen to improve its democratic processes and institutions. That’s not to say that they are quite there yet, but the same could be said for any country. Aided by established democracies, Georgia continues to move in the right direction. Certainly, for a medium or longer term assessment, it is direction that counts; and that direction for Georgia is looking West.

Indeed, you will be hard pressed to find any mainstream Georgian politician of any party (and they have many) who does not aspire for their nation to adopt NATO and EU membership. Ongoing close involvement with NATO, adoption of an Association

Agreement and visa rights with the EU are all helping Georgia forward on their desired path.

Ongoing reform to Georgia’s legal and judicial system continues to be a contentious issue. Yet freedom of speech, press and association are maintained and Georgia rates highly in indices for low corruption levels and ease of doing business.

Naturally, our All-Party Parliamentary Group for Georgia is keen to encourage the UK to assist where possible and to remind Ministers that in standing up for Georgia and against the aggression of Russia and its occupation of Georgian territory, we are effectively protecting our own institutions and democratic values. At the same time, most Georgians are not obsessed with Russia on a daily basis. Yes, they understand the need to improve their local military and cyber defences and also contribute to international peacekeeping efforts, as shown by their significant military contribution in Afghanistan. Yet, they are just as much if not more concerned with making friends around the world, enhancing trading conditions and encouraging investment and improved living conditions for their citizens.

With a stunning and very diverse countryside and a unique heritage, culinary and cultural offering, tourism has unsurprisingly become the mainstay of Georgia’s economy together with its agriculture and wine production. European cash and know-how have assisted investment in production, small loans for SMEs, environmental and power programmes and infrastructure. The wine culture is taking off as producers switch away from Soviet era mass production to a high quality product, better suited to the generally smaller size vineyards. Transport options and infrastructure as well as the hotels and hospitality provision have also improved dramatically over recent years.

However, Covid will have hit tourism hard, which is why I now frequently hear Georgian policy makers talking about the need to direct private and public investment towards more tech and research type business and education. Such a policy could be transformative for a smaller country that is instinctively creative and rich in design ability.

All being well, later this year, I shall be leading a group of British Members of Parliament to Tbilisi to mark the 30th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations and to continue to build on what has become a lasting friendship between our two countries.



Ever closer ties between the United Kingdom and Georgia