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Address by

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President of Georgia

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Distinguished President of the Assembly,
Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, ladies and gentlemen.

(The speaker continued in English.) As has been noted, this is the fourth time I have had the honour of addressing this Assembly. I attribute that not to my personal merits, but to the fact that I have been around for a long time as President, and it is part of the job description. It is an immense privilege to address the Assembly at such a crucial time for Georgian democracy.

Allow me first to express my deepest gratitude to the President of the Assembly, Jean-Claude Mignon, for inviting me to echo in this room the European and democratic aspirations of the Georgian people. As you all know, just three months ago the first transfer of power through elections in the history of our nation took place. As in every democracy, majorities can change in Georgia according to the wishes of the voters, but our national striving for freedom and European integration goes beyond any political division; it unites us, and constitutes the essence of our young state and the identity of our old nation. That is my main message today and I can think of no better place than this Assembly to deliver it.

The Council of Europe gathers all the nations of our continent around the principles and the values that have shaped the European destiny since the end of the Second World War: the values and principles that have torn down the Berlin Wall and led European reunification; the values of freedom, human rights, political accountability and the rule of law, to which the Georgian people are so attached and which have driven my entire political life.

Distinguished members of the Assembly, I remember well the day I discovered the Council of Europe, as a young intern from what was still called the Soviet Union back in 1991 – soon after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. My first steps in the free world and, therefore, in real politics – as real politics can exist only in freedom – were made in this very town and this very place. I made not just my first steps in politics here, but my main steps in life. I remember dividing my time between sleepless nights at the library of the European Court of Human Rights preparing for examinations in human rights case law at the human rights institute, and chasing on a bicycle a beautiful young student from the Netherlands, who happened later to become my wife and is sitting here smiling. Strasbourg was, therefore, a very exciting and special place for me.

On my return visits to Strasbourg, everything has changed for me, except my wife. I came back as an MP of independent Georgia with other young reformists for whom the Assembly has been an amazing school of democracy. Years later, I was invited here to speak as one of the leaders of the so-called Coloured Revolutions that were continuing the movement of emancipation and reunification initiated by the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Those were times of hope and enthusiasm.

Now I am here again, standing in front of you, as a President of co-habitation, a leader of a movement that has returned to opposition after more than eight years in office. It might surprise you, but after all those years, my hopes and my enthusiasm have only grown.

Ladies and gentlemen, from the very beginning, in the early '90s – when Georgia was a failed state, a divided and brutalised nation – my involvement in politics was inspired by the idea that Georgia would finally join the family of European democracies, the family of nations where Governments are changed by ballots, not bullets.

Of course, every politician in the world wants to win elections, and I am disappointed that the United National Movement failed to convince a majority of voters in last October's parliamentary elections. But I am proud that this party – my party – has contributed to build a system in which Governments and majorities are changed through elections, not coup d'états or revolutions, and an institutional framework that facilitates legitimate transfers of power instead of preventing them: a democracy.

For more than eight years, I have led a team that has radically transformed our nation, fought restlessly against corruption and organised crime, systematically dismantled the bureaucratic hurdles inherited from our Soviet past, liberated initiatives in society, and helped to shape the common perception that the Government was there to serve the people, not the other way round, and that legitimacy comes from the bottom to the top, rather than the reverse.

Many observers have rightly characterised this change of paradigms as a “mental revolution”. Fatalism, passivity, cynicism – the long-lasting legacy of *homo sovieticus* – has been overcome in Georgia. As in

most European nations, alternance will become, and has become, the rule, and no leader, no Government, no political or social force – nobody – can do anything to reverse that. That is why my hopes and enthusiasm are stronger than ever. What happened in Georgia during these last eight years, including on 1 October – a date that stands as an integral part of our democratic experience – has changed our nation and beyond, I deeply believe, our region. During these years, Georgia has shown that corruption was not a fate and authoritarianism was not a destiny, and that the choice was not between chaos and tyranny – as it is too often presented in the post-Soviet world – but between democracy and all other forms of government, whatever you call them. Georgia has proven that there was a radical alternative; a European choice.

During the past decade, we have paid a huge price for choosing transformation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Georgia has been threatened, embargoed, bombed, invaded and occupied. Two of our regions have been “ethnically cleansed”. Hundreds of thousands of our citizens have been expelled from their homes and, as I speak, still cannot go back to their towns and villages. That is, my dear friends, the environment in which we have built our democracy, in which our new state has emerged and in which our mental revolution has occurred.

I want to say today how proud I am of the Georgian people and the sacrifices that they have made so that our independence can survive and our democracy grow and flourish, and how much I admire their bravery and their faith in the future, their absence of hatred and their thirst for freedom of peace.

I want also to pay tribute to our friends all over Europe. Without their continued support, our democratic experience could not have survived and succeeded, and we could not have broken away from the prison of stereotypes and old clichés. I want especially to thank the Assembly for the multiple resolutions that it passed after the 2008 invasion. I thank you, distinguished members, and those who are no longer members but are present in the Chamber, such as Mátyás Eörsi, who helped us so much during those difficult times.

Resolutions 1633, 1647 and 1683 called in unambiguous terms for the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Georgia, full access of the EU Monitoring Mission to the occupied territories, the reversal of “ethnic cleansing”, a new peacekeeping format and an international policing force, and the withdrawal of the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as so-called independent states.

As you all know, those demands are still to be met. Since the resolutions were passed, the Russian military build-up in our occupied regions has never stopped, more Georgian villages have been burned and erased from the map by the “ethnic cleansers”, the EUMM has not been allowed in the occupied areas, and Russia’s diplomacy has been touring the world to bribe and pressure countries to legitimate its illegal occupation. Nevertheless, the formulation of those requests by the Assembly has been instrumental: such signals coming from you deter the aggressors, show everyone that principles and values matter, tell the victims that they are not alone, and remind the world what is so special about this institution and Europe in general.

I know that a resolution on the humanitarian situation in our occupied regions is being processed by the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population. I thank you in advance for supporting the resolution and for all your efforts to help us overcome the tragic humanitarian consequences of the invasion, the “ethnic cleansing” and the occupation.

I came here to express the immense gratitude of the Georgian nation and its hope that your attention and focus in support of our internal democratic progress will not decline before external threats. Georgia needs a strong and efficient Council of Europe and a vivid and relevant Parliamentary Assembly, as do all our neighbouring countries and the European continent in general. That is why I want to express my appreciation and support for the reforms initiated by the Secretary General and President Mignon.

(The speaker continued in French.) I congratulate you, Jean-Claude, on your successful initiative. It was urgent and necessary to carry out this reform. I am convinced that it will enhance the role and weight of the Assembly. The principles and dreams of the founding fathers of Europe are still alive in this Chamber. In Georgia, as elsewhere – perhaps more than elsewhere – we are aware of the crucial importance of what you do. We enthusiastically support everything that can enhance the Assembly and the Council of Europe. We are not just European-minded, but enthusiastic Europeans.

(The speaker continued in English.) During the last eight years, you accompanied us on our journey of institution building and democratic transformation. You have advised us, welcomed our progress – as in the latest resolution, Resolution 1801 – and proposed changes where you have thought that we could

further improve our practice and our framework. The co-operation that we have had during these years with the Council of Europe, the Assembly and the Venice Commission has been exemplary and has constantly helped us to improve our legal framework. Nobody can deny the expertise, good will and open attitude of the Venice Commission. That is why I call on our new government to wait for its recommendations before enforcing laws, especially when they touch on the court system and the judiciary.

I would like to seize the opportunity of this address to offer a special thanks to those of you who have monitored our parliamentary elections. First, I thank the chairman of the delegation, Luca Volontè. You have been able to testify that Georgia is getting closer to the standards that this institution promotes and that should one day unite all of us in this Chamber. Your vigilance, now that my country has passed what was presented as a litmus test, will be crucial to help ensure that Georgia continues to progress on the same path.

Unfortunately, as most of you know, and as has happened in many democracies in their early years, the Georgian political class suffers from the winner-takes-all mentality. From the selective prosecutions targeting former government officials, opposition MPs, local authorities and independent media, to the direct physical assaults by pro-ruling party activists against opposition representatives and elected local self-governments, a coherent campaign has started to silence the political opposition; to get a constitutional majority in parliament through blackmail, pressure and criminal cases against MPs and their families; and to seize the entirety of the institutions.

The peaceful and constitutional change of government, by showing that the institutions did not belong to any party and by opening a period of cohabitation between different elected bodies with diverse political colours, should have been a tremendous opportunity to push further the reforms that we had not been able to carry out fully and especially to ensure the independence of the judiciary and the media. Instead, the new authorities have publicly linked the wave of arrests to the political activities of the opposition; we have heard claims in the media that the mission of the new government is to destroy the United National Movement through the judiciary; we have witnessed daily attacks on the judges who are trying to assert their autonomy; and there has been constant harassment of the independent media, starting with the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster was created to set up new standards of objectivity in the Georgian media landscape. According to the EU media monitoring mission, the first public channel was the only absolutely balanced TV channel during last year's election campaign. Instead of reinforcing the emergence of an objective public TV channel, the new government has pushed the director of GPB to resign and has announced a plan to merge GPB with a channel privately owned by the new leaders. Such an initiative would take us years and years backwards. Simultaneously, the director of the biggest private channel in Georgia, Rustavi 2, has been detained and faces court hearings that could bring him many years of prison for charges related to the commercial activities of his legal company. Plans have been announced to change the ownership of Rustavi 2 through the judiciary.

It is true that we did not succeed in all our reforms and that much more needs to be done, but the new government – we wish it success – should go further in building our democratic framework, instead of undermining what has been built. It is also true that some reforms were not fully understood by various segments of the population. I agree that our communication to the public was sometimes deficient, but I believe that principles and values are worth taking political risks for.

The law that we passed in 2011 to give equal rights to all religious minorities might have cost us some votes, but is it a reason to resort to hate speeches and revive the fire of intolerance, for instance by attacking innocent citizens or by releasing with all honours fanatics who had been convicted for physical assaults against minorities? It is possible that our decision to remove all the monuments to the glory of soviet tyrants and our constant fight against the communist legacy has displeased certain categories of the population, but does that justify the restoration of statues of Stalin in some areas of Georgia, paid for by state funds?

Ladies and gentlemen, the new government in Tbilisi says that it wants to pursue the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia. That is obviously a positive signal, and I have welcomed it publicly several times, offering to help the relevant Ministers on this topic as much as I can. It is good to claim it, but claiming it will not be good enough; one has to act accordingly. The UN and NATO are not simple partners for Georgia; they are the families we want to join, the transformative goals of our foreign policy and the horizon of our internal reforms. That explains the surprise created by the statements of the Prime Minister during his recent visit to Yerevan. He said there that a country can and should have good

relations with Russia and NATO at the same time, putting a strange equidistance between both, and citing our Armenian friends as an example.

I am tremendously proud that during my presidency, relations between not only the Governments but the people of Georgia and Armenia have improved dramatically, and the relations are exemplary at the moment. That is important, and I am very proud of it. It is good that after initial verbal attacks against our regional partners and neighbours, the new Georgian Government has toned down such rhetoric. It is important to understand, however, that Georgia has chosen to pursue NATO membership but Armenia, for its own reasons, has not. It is the sovereign right of every nation to choose the alliances it wants to join, but relations and integration are not the same. Unfortunately, what the Prime Minister said a few days ago changes everything we have been saying for all these years. He gave up de facto Georgia's NATO aspirations; that is what the declaration meant. I think that Georgia should integrate with NATO and have good relations with Russia at the same time.

I was the one who initiated visa-free travel with Russia, and I was the one who supported the World Trade Organisation deal with Russia. We unilaterally abolished visa requirements for Russian citizens. Under no Government have so many Russian tourists entered Georgia as under the last years of my Government, and I am very proud of that. Under no Government have we had so many cultural ties with Russia as during the last years and months of my Government, and I am very proud of that too. It is one thing to have cultural, economic and trade ties – that is something we should enhance – but it is another thing to change our foreign policy and orientation, which is based on values and the fundamental direction of our nation. I do not think that that is what the Georgian people have voted for. I hope that we can get better explanations and can help to correct the Prime Minister's very alarming declaration.

We need good relations with neighbours, but we should not sacrifice other objectives. The level of obligation implied by the word "integration" has nothing to do with a simple relation between two entities. Unfortunately, such a statement comes after several national security and foreign policy moves that, for the first time in a decade, cast doubts on what the Georgian Government intends to do. Denouncing the Baku-Istanbul railway project, which is a huge geopolitical breakthrough connecting Georgia to Europe, while promoting the railway to Russia through Abkhazia without clearly answering questions on its status, means changing the strategic orientation and basically disconnecting us from European strategic lines. Freeing without investigation people who were convicted for spying for Russia while jailing some of those who built our counter-intelligence system in co-operation with the West also raises concerns. Explaining proudly to the Georgian public that the new government has repelled successfully a wave of "western attacks" is anti-western rhetoric from a sovereign democracy, rhetoric that we thought long dead in our country.

We have preserved our enthusiasm for EU and NATO despite the threats, the bombs, the invasion and the occupation that aimed to oblige us to change our path. The Georgian people will not give that enthusiasm up lightly. Is it time, now that we are closer than ever to our objectives, to show hesitation or to cast doubts on our trajectory? Ladies and gentlemen, nothing is irreversible and there is room, I am sure, for a fruitful cohabitation in Georgia. I told the Prime Minister that we need to find a way out of the stand-off. We would both benefit from it and we owe it to the Georgian people. I offered a five-step plan to the majority to ensure a peaceful cohabitation and guarantee that we all put the supreme interests of the nation above our political rivalries. From the economy, with a joint conference for investors, to foreign policy, with common initiatives on the EU and NATO, we can and should work together. Nobody would gain anything from the paralysis of our institutions, a pause on western integration or the decline of our economy. Nobody has an interest in the failure of our new government and the new majority, because such a failure would hurt the country in general.

This is my solemn pledge: let us work together to improve what can be improved in our democracy and let us focus on the principles on which we can agree, the very principles that are the basis of the Council of Europe and that all major political forces claim to respect, promote and defend in Georgia. What is at stake is much more important than our respective political interests, and much deeper than our personal rivalries or collective ambitions. What is at stake is the future of our democracy, and, beyond that, the future of democracy in our region. That is worth standing up for and fighting for.