



## Georgia celebrates Independence Day 26 May

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MAY 26  
INDEPENDENCE DAY  
OF GEORGIA

Today, 26th of May marks Georgia's 31st year of Independence since the restoration of the independent Georgian Democratic Republic in 1991 and 104 years since the establishment of the first Georgian Democratic Republic in 1918. We also celebrate the millennia of our unique national and cultural identity and heritage.

The commemoration occurs at a time when Georgia embraces African partnerships, advances towards European integration, while remaining resilient against a backdrop of geo-political turbulence in its region.

Since the restoration of its independence, Georgia has overcome numerous challenges through trial and error despite facing foreign adversity. Georgia has embarked on a decisive path to strengthen its parliamentary democracy and pursue sustainable development. We established constitutional guarantees for human rights, civil liberties and economic freedom, underpinned by economic diversification, citizen-centric efficient state systems and anti-corruption measures.

Georgia's foreign policy emphasizes strong global partnerships, including those with Africa. As a European country, its outreach starts at home by deepening ties with its neighbors and pursuing full European and Euro-Atlantic integration. We have entered into Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), and acceded to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade (DCFTA) pact with the EU. Georgian citizens have started to enjoy visa free travel into the Schengen Area. This year Georgia expects to become a candidate for EU membership.

We have also managed to transform Georgia into an indispensable hub for East-West interaction and multifaceted trade via a multi-modal transportation system. Georgia already contributes to increased opportunities for facilitation of Europe's energy security by being a conduit for Caspian oil and gas to European markets. A recent example of Georgia's increased role in the international arena was the introduction of a new Rail-Sea route connecting Asia to Europe.

While our priorities start with our neighborhood, we have also broadened diplomatic partnerships into Africa. Our basic message is clear and simple: South Africa and African peers should view Georgia as a reliable partner and sincere friend at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This creates the

potential to develop mutually beneficial relations across a wide spectrum of areas including trade, investment, arts, culture, sports, education, and people-to-people contacts, among others.

Georgians view South Africa as an example of vibrant constitutional democracy, diversity, good values, and media and economic freedoms. The South African liberation struggle created inspiring global heroes such as the late Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid stalwarts who lived as shining examples of democratic transformation, reconciliation and mutual forgiveness.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993 and the opening of the Georgian Embassy in Pretoria in 2011, Georgia and South Africa have developed institutional frameworks for continued political dialogue. They held rounds of Senior Officials Political Consultations as well as facilitated inter-parliamentary engagement. They have further cooperated with mutual support in the international fora.

The establishment and successful operation of the Southern Africa Georgia Chamber of Commerce (SAGCC) boosted various business partnerships. A twinning arrangement between Cape Winelands District Municipality and the Georgian wine Region of Kakheti has commenced. The Georgia-South Africa Winemaker Exchange Programme is one the elements of this arrangement, benefiting previously disadvantaged young South Africans. The formalization of cooperative ties between higher educational institutions and joint research projects between the two countries' scientists in various areas are equally notable.

The Georgia-South Africa long-standing interaction in Rugby has intensified. The Georgian Rugby franchise "Black Lions" features in the Carling Currie Cup tournament. Cooperation in rugby between our two nations has extended beyond sports to people-to-people interaction, bilateral tourism and the emergence of new business ideas and initiatives. Georgia has opened to South Africans and as a good will granted unilaterally visa-free entry. Georgians residing in Southern Africa, including top-level medical practitioners, business executives and academics, are contributing considerably to their host countries. A number of South Africans are also pursuing their professional careers and business opportunities in Georgia.

From the Embassy in Pretoria, Georgia

forges partnerships with 12 Southern African States: Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, DRC, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

We continue to institutionalize our relations with these African nations, activating diplomatic channels such as the network of Georgia's Honorary Consuls and others.

While pursuing a positive domestic and international agenda, Georgia, regrettably, has been affected by the imperialistic policies of Russia, which continues to occupy 20% of our territory illegally - Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region.

This occupation has caused a humanitarian disaster. Hundreds of thousands of our citizens, predominantly ethnic Georgians, fell victims to Russian war crimes and ethnic cleansing. Hundreds of thousands remain internally displaced persons and refugees. Few Georgians still residing in their ancestral homes on occupied territories suffer from apartheid-like treatment, discrimination and persecution. Going through such a traumatic experience ourselves, we feel the suffering and pain of the Ukrainian people and stand in full solidarity with Ukraine, which has also fallen victim to aggression and unprovoked war.

Despite the dire circumstances, Georgia continues to explore peaceful solutions whilst remaining alert and prepared to defend itself. Unwavering international solidarity to our sovereignty and territorial integrity stems from the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law. This, coupled with the realization globally that these principles must be protected more effectively, strengthens our confidence that the virus of occupation and annexation of sovereign Nations, including Georgia, is short-lived and shall end.

Throughout the years, Georgia has gained numerous Southern African friends, who have been celebrating independence and sovereignty day with us annually. As the first Ambassador of Georgia to Southern Africa, I feel privileged for the unforgettable experiences in this beautiful and enigmatic continent of Africa.

The warmth, hospitality, wisdom, friendliness, resilience, zest for life that ordinary South Africans display humbles one. Georgia looks forward to further deepening friendship with South Africa - the Nation that has the power to capture a special place in everyone's hearts and minds, forever.