

European Commissioner Speaks Of Action Plan.

By Ketik Sikharulidze ; 20/2/2006

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The European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) Benita Ferrero-Waldner made her first bilateral visit to Tbilisi on Thursday, February 16. The visit was a part of a trip to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to discuss consultations preparing country-specific ENP Action Plans.

Rule of law, development of democracy, court reforms, reform of law enforcements, and cooperation on boarder protect issues and conflict resolution issues were the main priorities at meetings, officials said.

"We have changed our view of what national priorities Georgia has and how our national priorities respond the neighborhood policy of the commission and in a number of issues we have the exact same position," Georgia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Gela Bezhuashvili said at a joint briefing on Thursday.

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner hoped the Georgia-EU partnership would intensify this year.

"The Action Plan will bring you tangible benefits for the country, big on the financial side, big on the economic side, big on the democracy side," said Ferrero-Waldner, "You will have possibilities to enter into policies of the European Union that until now have been open only to member states."

Asked how the ENP is connected to eventual membership in the EU, she said there are no guarantees that the policy will eventually lead to Georgia's membership.

"The European Neighborhood Policy is not for membership. This is clear, but at the same time it brings every country much closer to the European Union and the future is also not pre-judged... I think [Georgia should] have a pragmatic approach and really try to take advantage of what we are offering... I think our counterparts have understood that," she said.

One of the top issues during discussions was energy security. Waldner said energy security "is one of the new, highly important issues in external relations" for the European Commission.

Ferrero-Waldner said the European Commission is preparing a special document on energy security that will include analysis and what measures can be done.

"We think that [energy] diversification is very important, but also reliability and that will be the focus. Of course we have to explore all different possibilities. There are many and I hope that by end of March when this communication is out we will have a very close look at it," she said.

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner also hopes that 2006 would be the year of peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region.

"Without European cooperation and stability none of the three countries of the Southern Caucasus will really be able to take full of advantage of the Action Plan. Therefore we also are looking forward to help in

peaceful settlement of the conflicts in the region and we will try to do everything to support that," she added.

Her visit will be followed by further consultations between EU and South Caucasus countries in order to finalize the Action Plans as soon as possible, though no date has been given. Georgia's foreign minister reported the negotiations will be continued in Brussels this March.

The European Neighborhood Policy is an agreement between the European and its neighbors that aims to intensify relations and promote progressive integration including by offering a stake in the EU market.

The EC is one of the main donors of assistance to the South Caucasus.

Over the period 1991-2004, EC has allocated over Euro 1.2 billion in assistance spread out equally to all three countries. Half of the assistance is geared towards poverty reduction and food security. The rest of the money was used for Technical Assistance-CIS (TACIS) programs.
