

EU neglecting democratic reforms in Georgia, say NGOs

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BY VALENTINA POP

BRUSSELS - The EU is focusing too much on free trade and economic agreements with the Georgian government, instead of pressing for needed democratic reforms, several NGO representatives from Tbilisi have said.

More than two years after the Russian war and the 2009 demonstrations asking for President Mikhail Saakashvili to resign, media attention has shifted away from the small Caucasus country, as Belarus, Tunisia and now Egypt are making the headlines.

But despite 2010 being a calm year in Georgia, the EU should use its leverage to hold the government accountable for democratic reforms, says Tamar Khidasheli from the Georgian Young Lawyers Association.

Ms Khidasheli and two other NGO workers from Georgia were speaking in Brussels on Tuesday (8 February) at a briefing organised by the Open Society Institute.

"For us, EU integration means democratisation, economic standards and security," Ms Khidasheli explained. "But on the democracy side, the EU is not utilising all its leverage the way it could. For instance, the huge economic assistance after the war should have been used to ask for democratic reforms. The EU is focusing on free trade agreements, economic harmonisation, but there are no benchmarks on the rule of law and the respect for human rights," she said.

The constitutional and electoral reforms carried through last year, as part of the truce with the opposition following the street protests in 2009, did bring about some changes, but failed to increase the role of the parliament or to open up government practices to transparency and access to documents.

"A number of developments required under the European Neighbourhood Policy really happened: There were efforts from the government to co-operate with the opposition and involve the civil society in the elaboration of the electoral code," said Ketevan Khutsishvili from Open Society Georgia Foundation.

But with EU's newest foreign policy - the Eastern Partnership - gradually being implemented, Ms Khutsishvili expressed concerns that the precise requirements under the previous neighbourhood policy tools will be watered down.

"The Eastern Partnership is a recent development and what some see as a minus is that there are no benchmarks or commitments required from the governments. Certainly, there are lots of opportunities for bilateral and multilateral co-operation, but no benchmarks to hold these governments accountable," she explained.

Access to documents and transparency of government accounts is still a problem in Georgia, said Manana Kochladze from the Association Green Alternative.

"There are big investment proposals for instance on water supply facilities or energy plants which are sealed off from the public – not even data on the quality of the water is being

made public," she said.

Property rights are also an issue, especially after the government introduced a new registry and now requires all land owners to register by the end of 2011 or face the danger of their properties being seized. But registration is costly and for people in remote areas, information is scarce and they are often victims of predatory developers who, with government support, are building tourist resorts and hotels.