

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2009

## Starting at Home | Georgia First Lady on Europeanizing Georgia

Georgia's First Lady knows how to get a lively debate going. Invited by the Institute for European Studies at Tbilisi State University, Mrs. Saakashvili-Roelofs visited Tbilisi State University on 10 November to hold a keynote speech on the "Importance of EU Experience for Georgia's Domestic Development". It turned out to be an interactive and thought-provoking debate, in which the Pirveli Lady explicitly engaged the audience, mostly consisting of undergraduate students. Dutch-born Mrs. Roelofs was accompanied by her brother Egbert, who is currently living and working in France.

Keen on addressing the core questions underlying the Europeanisation debate in Georgia, Mrs. Saakashvili-Roelofs started by asking whether Georgia is indeed a part of Europe. After discussing this question with the audience, she concluded that although Georgia is geographically split between a European and an Asian part, its politics remain firmly directed towards Europe. Illustrating this, the First Lady recounted her husband telling the President of a new EU member state: "Congratulations, you're now in the European House. But please don't close the back door."

When the First Lady asked if, and how, Georgia would truly benefit from joining the European Union, several students were eager to discuss the benefits a potential EU membership would give them: it would make it easier for them to travel, and to study at European universities ([CRRC's recent EU survey](#) shows 37 percent of those under 35 years of age interested in studying at a European university).

Despite acknowledging the general economic advantages of EU membership, the First Lady also placed some critical comments. In particular, she expressed her worries that EU membership could bring an end to traditional Georgian craftsmanship and raise the prices of Georgian products, since EU regulations on agricultural and commercial products would homogenise Georgia's traditional ways of production and lead to the bankruptcy of those artisans who would not be able to modernise their business. "What are the alternatives for economic integration with the EU?" Mrs. Saakashvili-Roelofs asked the audience. Could Georgia, with its highly skilled population, not become an economic hub and a tax haven, like for instance Singapore or Dubai?

Above all however, the First Lady stressed that EU accession would require the Georgian population to embrace European values. In particular, Georgians would have to become more aware of their civic duties, such as assisting the government in improving public health. Wearing a seatbelt, for one, seems to remain a cultural taboo in Georgia, and interest in Tbilisi's free breast cancer prevention programme remains low. However, the audience was quick to suggest effective solutions to this problem, like "handing out free t-shirts with seatbelts printed on them". On a more serious note, Mrs. Saakashvili-Roelofs then stated that if Georgia wanted to become a true member of the European community, it would have to learn to embrace its weak and marginalised groups, like mentally and physically handicapped people, and respect every individual's decision to live life in their own way.

The First Lady concluded on a positive note, saying that Europeanisation is a two-way street and that Europe can also learn from Georgia. She praised the strong sense of community in Georgia, and the many families who choose to take care of their elderly family members rather than sending them to retirement homes - as is often the case in Western European countries. And, of course, she did not forget to mention Georgia's traditional dances, songs and its rich literature.

The Institute of European Studies at Tbilisi State University regularly hosts events and regular talks. Check their [website](#) to get onto their mailing list.