

IDU EXECUTIVE MEETING

Athens, Greece

April 20, 2005

**Presenting Speech by David Gamkrelidze, MP
Chairman of the New Conservative Party of Georgia**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Being here to address the International Democrat Union and have my party considered for membership in this organization, is a great honor.

- It is a pleasure to have our party, four short years after its founding, to be received so warmly at an organization that unites so many of the conservative and center-right parties around the world.
- As well, our presence here a confirmation that our work in Georgia is not in vain, and our attempt to create a real political entity, based on a union behind political ideas rather than a leading political personality, might be actually succeeding.

Allow me to begin by giving you a brief background about who we are as a political party. I will tell our story and in connection to key developments in Georgia in recent years.

History on the New Conservative Party

After failing to take advantage of the first democratic opening, which presented itself after the collapse of Communism, Georgia was given a second opportunity to build a democracy in the mid-1990s. In 1995, when this process began, Georgia approved a new Constitution.

Unfortunately, this time around, Georgia again failed to take advantage of its second democratic opening. Then President Eduard Shevardnadze and his allies used less than democratic tactics to maintain their grip on power. Elections in 1995, 1999, and 2000 were marred with numerous irregularities. They resulted in a political environment in which only Shevardnadze's political party, the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG), dominated the space and sucked the oxygen out of any real opposition. I know this first hand since along with many of my friends who joined together to form the New Rights (Conservative) Party in 2001.

When we first entered politics, my colleagues and I realized that the core problem with all political parties in Georgia lay with the absence of unifying political ideas that brought its members and its leaders together. Political parties in Georgia were vehicles for leading political personalities to advance their interests, rather than traditional parties in the Western sense. We felt that Georgia needed a political entity unified by shared ideas.

As well, we shared values that no one seemed to be defending in Georgian politics – defense of political and economic liberty, promotion of a limited government, sanctity of private property, advancement of real market economic reforms through reduced regulation and lower taxation, and protection of traditional values and heritage.

So, we formed a new party to both advance a vision for a real political party, organized around ideas, and to promote these conservative values. We were formally organized as a political party in June 2001, bringing together over a dozen Parliamentarians as well as thousands of citizens from across the country who shared this vision. A year later, faced our first electoral test, when we overwhelmingly defeated all other political parties in local government elections and came in third in the race for the city council in Tbilisi.

In 2003, Georgia faced the crucial Parliamentary elections, which everyone considered the beginning of the end of the Shevardnadze era. Our party did everything possible to create a legal environment in which truly democratic and free elections could take place. As well, we engaged in a massive campaign to educate citizens about our ideas and values, since we knew that succeeding with free market ideas would be difficult. Our goal was not to come in first. Rather, we wanted to do well enough to gain seats in Parliament – to show that a conservative party indeed had a place in the political scene. Notwithstanding tremendous pressure from the government as well as fraud, we succeeded.

Official results from the November 2003 elections gave six parties seats in Parliament. However, as you probably know, there was indeed fraud during the elections. Two of these six parties, which together had won only 35 percent of the vote according to the more accurate Parallel Vote Tabulations, used fraud as an excuse to bring people into the streets and eventually force the resignation of President Shevardnadze.

We had also suffered from the fraud in November. However, we refused to join the protests for two principal reasons. First, we knew that those leading the protests were not actually committed to democracy, given their past history. I think that developments in Georgia since the Revolution have proven us right. Second, we believed that using extra-constitutional means would have an

adverse effect on the possibility of democratic consolidation. It would have been better for opposition parties to enter the Parliament, where they would have held a majority, and to press for legislative changes to help ensure that the future elections would be fully free and fair. Furthermore, we proposed either calling early elections six months later. Unfortunately, Mr. Saakashvili, who was leading these protests, rejected such a compromise several times.

The result is well known – the Rose Revolution, which brought 100 percent of the power to that two groups, which had won just a little over 1/3 of the vote.

After the Rose Revolution, we faced another election, in March 2004, which was a re-vote of the proportional part of the November elections. It is quite ironic that the new government chose to cancel the proportional results from November but not the majoritarian (that is, the first-past-the-post district) elections, even though both results had suffered from the exact same kind of corruption and fraud. In light of the post-revolutionary euphoria, the limited access to the media and limited financing, we are very proud to have been the only non-governmental political group to receive over seven percent of the vote in March 2004, and thus take our place as the opposition in the Parliament. Today our faction holds 17 Parliamentary seats.

We seek membership in the International Democrat Union because it is one international organization that shares so many of our values and our principals. As well, joining the IDU will help us gain an additional support network to help defend the possibility of democracy in Georgia.

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you briefly about Georgia and out the New Conservative party, and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Let me also say a few words about our core believe. First, we believe that in a **liberal democracy**, citizens enter into a social contract to secure their freedom and prosperity. To this end, we believe in **limited government** – we see the state’s job not dong everything, but rather focusing only on those things that citizens cannot do individually. We advocate a government based on the respect for the **rule of law and private property**, and that without these values, you cannot have a truly free market economy. Finally, we believe that **Georgian traditional values, history, culture, and faith** have a place in the political debate. While we certainly respect the right of citizens to worship freely, we fight the secularization advocated by some, who believe in relativism, and who argue that the Orthodox Church is “backward” and “anti-democratic.”

Within this core framework of beliefs, our key policy priorities include:

- Defending the democratic values and the rule of law, protect freedom of speech, free enterprise, and a democratic electoral process.
- Revising the Georgian constitution to create a truly balanced form of government, with an independent judiciary and powerful legislature.
- Securing Georgia's membership in NATO, as soon as practically possible.
- Creating a real free market economy, with a fair and reformed tax system, which does not penalize citizens for trying to do business or grow their enterprises, and reduction in the state control over the economy.
- Improving the quality of education by teaching children the modern skill they require as well the Georgian culture, heritage, and literature.