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## THE SWISS AMBASSADOR ON SWISS-GEORGIAN RELATIONS

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On February 5, the new Swiss Ambassador to Georgia Patric Franzen held a reception at the Swiss residency in Tbilisi. He outlined past achievements and challenges as well as initiatives planned for the coming year.

### On education

Switzerland is committed to educating young Georgians, especially through vocational training. Two-thirds of Swiss youth participate in vocational courses. By improving vocational training in Georgia, especially in rural areas, Switzerland hopes to create a better-equipped workforce and lower unemployment in Georgia.

### On bilateral trade

Switzerland is looking to deepen its economic ties with Georgia. At the end of January, Swiss chocolate company Camille Block announced that it will invest in Georgia, whilst the Mediterranean Shipping Company is investing in ports in Batumi and Poti. Currently, the largest Georgian exports to Switzerland are precious metals followed by textiles. On the other hand, Switzerland exports pharmaceuticals (53%), watches (15%), medical equipment (5%), and paper (4%), among other products. Georgia exports a larger amount of goods to Switzerland than vice-versa. Officials from Switzerland and Georgia will also hold meetings to further progress trade relations.

In order to attract further investment from Swiss companies, Georgia must ensure that they have a strong legal framework, offer a reliable and predictable environment, and regional stability.

### On asylum seekers

The number of Georgians seeking asylum has almost doubled since the introduction of the visa-free regime in March 2017. In 2018, 873 Georgians sought asylum in Switzerland compared to 405 in 2015. The acceptance rate is 0%, stated Franzen, there is a new trend of asylum seekers - we have more and more medical cases. Interestingly, there are no direct flights between Georgia and Switzerland yet (we are working on it), but in spite of this, the number of asylum seekers in Switzerland has increased... We are in discussions with the Ministry of Health of Georgia. I have to say that we have great cooperation with the Georgian authorities to deal with this challenge, he concluded.

#### On Russia

The ambassador also discussed Switzerland's role as a mediator between Russia and Georgia. Having previously represented Georgia's interests in Moscow, Franzen will now represent Russia in Tbilisi. Franzen announced that the Georgian-Switzerland diplomatic and customs negotiations by Swiss mediators have already been completed although some technical issues are still to be decided. It's a long road and there are many obstacles, said Franzen, but we are quite satisfied with the progress so far.

Switzerland and Georgia share many similarities; beautiful landscape, wine-making tradition and mountains. In 2019, Switzerland plans to open a new embassy in Vake in Tbilisi, signifying their commitment to continue to cooperate and invest in Georgia.

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