

# INTERVIEW WITH MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI: GEORGIA'S WESTWARD MARCH\*

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\* Mikheil Saakashvili is the President of Georgia.

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**ou turned around the fate of your country. What is the Georgia model, what do your achievements amount to, and why should it matter to the West and to Turkey to preserve these achievements?**

First of all we have expanded the geographic horizons of the West – a geopolitical sphere defined by rule of law, efficient government and open society, democratic elections and periodic change of government within a clearly identified institutional framework. These are not Soviet or even “post-Soviet” natural features. We have managed to achieve these in the most unlikely place. Despite centuries-old contacts with the rest of Europe, the Georgia we inherited was a very corrupt, inefficient, and, in many ways socially backwards society due to remnants of feudal elements from the past and the negative influence of the former imperial center, Moscow.



To be blunt, one can say that Georgia was unlucky with its geography: being so close to Russia and, seen from Brussels, standing on the wrong side of the Black Sea... But it depends on how you look at it: Georgia’s geographic location can also be seen as a chance, as a gateway for European influence towards Asia and a pivotal element of an East-West corridor that is decisive for Europe in terms of energy transit obviously, but in many other ways too... We have tried and often managed to turn disadvantages into advantages and convince the West that we were part of it, culturally, politically, and strategically... A new model emerged here, a homegrown success story based on the transposition of European or Western principles and values in a post-Soviet or Soviet society.

There are value-based reasons and more “real-political” reasons for why this should matter. Georgia’s success generated a following in the region and it should remain as an example to be followed by others. Plus, the South Caucasus also matters if you look at what might happen after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, if radical elements become more active in Central Asia and pose a threat to the regional stability. Azerbaijan and Georgia would find themselves in a position of the first defense line of modernity in the region...

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**In April 2008 you said your main intent is the cultural transformation from Soviet mentality to a Western one. Where is Georgia in this course of transformation, whether it can turn back, what needs to happen for Turkey and the West not to have to worry about whether Georgia might be lost?**

The main indicator will be whether we can keep the democratic system of government. If people continue to own their government, instead being owned by their government, as it unfortunately happens too often in the post-Soviet world, if the democratic framework is kept and if freedoms survive, then the Georgian experience will be a shining success – despite all the setbacks. The survival of this framework will result in another change of government through elections, later, and I think the next government –whoever it is, though hopefully it will be one formed by my party– will be better than this one. In any case what matters is the continuation of this political process within the institutions we have created, and not outside or against them.

We have built strong institutions enjoying the confidence of the people; no matter which personality is leading them, which is very unusual in the post-Soviet space. These institutions continue to function today despite the fact that the people who came to power in the last elections had slogans and ideologies that rejected them. Unfortunately, the rejection was not just against our personalities, but against the institutions we had established. This was and remains dangerous. Nevertheless, despite this tendency to reject the institutions, the new majority has to live with them and to adapt to them. This shows that we managed to create an institutional framework that cannot be overpowered so easily.

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To make sure this path is taken is up to the political and social leaders of the nation, and the Georgian people. But it will also depend largely on the level of involvement of our Western allies, of EU and NATO. Any perception of European or American withdrawal from our region would empower the forces that oppose democracy and freedom. Any impression that principles do not

matter anymore or that the region does not matter anymore would clearly hurt reforms and reformist forces. This is why I keep touring the world, especially Europe and the U.S.; to constantly revive the attention to our country, and beyond, on our region. We need Europe and the U.S. to remain as involved as before if we want a stable and democratic South Caucasus to succeed.

**Considering how important Turkey is for Georgia and Georgia is for Turkey, there has been remarkably little investment in each other’s intellectual elite, public debate, or soft power. How do you explain that?**

I agree... I think Turkey is very good at many things and I am a great advocate of Turkish role in our region, but I have always had the impression that Turkey did not have –until very recently– the tradition of public relations abroad, or the knowledge how to project its soft power, which is potentially huge. This is something that is now developing and I welcome it totally.

The biggest regret that I have from our side is that, we –as the government– should have sent lots of young people just to see Turkey, hopefully to study in Turkey. Even visits of a few days would have done the trick. Very few people in my country actually know Turkey. This explains why some old prejudices remain.

I think this is the biggest paradox with Turkey – they have tremendous economic power, geopolitical power, and general soft power as in the case of the Arab Spring, where people say this is a model – but they are referring to a general notion, a source of inspiration. Even people in Arab countries do not have much firsthand experience with Turks. To make the notion sustainable it is necessary to do the kind of things that Germany and Poland did, such as exchanging young people, forming joint cultural centers or having joint programs for students.

Turkey’s history with its neighbors is a complicated one obviously and as a result, there are many prejudices left behind. But they could be easily overcome. It

was overcome at the government level. But because we in the government did not share any of these prejudices, we did not realize that prejudices prevailed among part of the population. Because many people started to come from Turkey and make investments in Georgia, we thought the society-to-society links would take care of themselves. But it was too slow. You need some concerted governmental efforts to develop society relations – especially at the level of young people. This is still a weak part of what we have done. It is starting but we are not there yet.

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**Were you caught by surprise by Turkey’s reaction to the August War? There has been a view in Turkey that the U.S. and Georgia together perpetuated the continuation of Cold War dynamics in the Caucasus. Did it have to be like this?**

First of all, there was a problem in the past between Turkey and the U.S. administration, related to the Iraqi situation, the Kurdish situation. This was one of the main reasons why there might have been some projection on Georgia as well. The Bush administration, which was very friendly to us, did not establish very close relations with Turkey. The U.S. factor in the region raised questions with Turks from time to time and these inadvertently created at a point some reservations in Turkey towards Georgia’s freedom agenda and NATO ambitions.

Nevertheless, relations boomed between Turkey and Georgia. The multilateral problems were not really projected on bilateral relations. On the contrary, in three, four years time we managed to quintuple the trade relations, establish visa-free and passport-free travel, and a joint airport. The general climate of relations changed at every level and any challenges that arose were solved very fast. It was a golden era of our bilateral relations. So, even if the U.S. equation came here, it was purely theoretical.

What changed though, with Obama’s attitude towards Turkey now, is that Turkey has become an active proponent of Georgia’s integration with NATO – and that is where the multilateral element comes in. The usual question of NATO enlargement skeptics regarding Georgia was not about the internal situation in Georgia – we were very good performers. What they were asking was who will defend Georgia, which country will be the frontline support? In the Baltic case it was Poland. Now in the case of Georgia Turks are proactively saying, “this is us.” Improvement of

Turkish-American relations was the new element that complemented what was already achieved at the bilateral level.

### **Was it also a reflection of a reality check in Turkey regarding Russia?**

Yes, I think part of it has to do with that. Turkey tried to reach out to Russia proactively all the time but the Russian government clearly sees Turkey as a rival or even a foe in this region. Some of the reactions against Turkey among certain groups in Georgia, such as those saying that “Turkey is an occupant,” reflect an influence of Russian interests and structures. We have in my country xenophobic groups who pretend to show their nationalism by protesting against alleged Turkish threats, while they are very silent on the Russian occupation of 20 percent of our territory and the Russian-led ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Georgian citizens... Their influence has been reactivated during and after the elections in Georgia.

If you look at the pattern of how Russia acts in other countries, it is similar. It is clear that Russia never stopped to compete with Turkey here, in the same way Russia never stopped competing with the West here. There was a moment when the West pretended not to notice it, but the Russians have always noticed it. Turks were always aware of it, but now they see with clarity that the Southern Caucasus is not a place Russia will want to give up even a bit of its influence in favor of Turks. It is not just a reality check, it is the experience we have had recently with Russian policy.

### **There is a segment of the Turkish business community eager to trade with Abkhazia. Some in the EU are also looking for ways to strike a win-win arrangement agreed with Tbilisi to help break the isolation of Abkhazia. Can this be worked out?**

Our position was always very clear. We have strong enough relations with Turkey to strike a win-win arrangement in which Georgia’s sovereignty is formally respected. If there is a ship going from Turkey to Sukhumi, that most go let’s say from Trabzon, then there should be Georgian customs officials sitting in Trabzon checking what is on this ship and stamping it. This is doable and Turks agree with it in principle.

I went to İnegöl<sup>1</sup> last time I visited Turkey. You see there that there are Abkhaz and Georgians living together. While Georgians are keen to support Georgia as a country, Abkhaz support the general idea of Abkhazia –maybe not necessarily as a country but as their homeland– they do not have problems with each other. Despite these

<sup>1</sup> A small town near Bursa in Turkey.

different orientations, they do not see why in İnegöl they should have problems with each other. It is very remarkable to observe this.

I had an impromptu rally there. There were local Abkhaz that came with their flags, but they were not hostile. This is an indication of why there is this specificity of the Turkish approach. If this is doable in Turkey, this is a model that can be projected.

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But again we are very sensitive to the fact that in no way the occupation and attempted dismemberment of our nation should be legitimated. And Turkey understands this very well.

**There has been some concern in Turkey about xenophobic statements that could be heard from some members of the current government, and the questioning of Turkish influence. Do you think there is reason for Turkish businesses to be concerned?**

The biggest problem we have is not with xenophobia as such, the biggest problem is the slowdown of economy. We had predicted 11 percent growth, whereas we may have zero growth of the economy this year – and the government itself says it may be zero growth.

The critical issue related to Turkish investment was the recent questioning by Georgian officials of the hydropower investment by Turks, as well as questioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway – which is of vital importance to Georgia. But I do not think the government can afford in any pragmatic way to alienate Turkish investors and businessmen. And I think they know this. The problem is how strong the government will be to handle its own constituencies, some of which flourish on these negative things.

The problem we have now is that we have a government too much focused on negative issues rather than on positive ones. That is my concern. If there is a constituency focused on negative issues, the kind of rhetoric we had in the pre-election period comes about.

I do not think in the medium and long run there will be problems for Turkish business. Avoiding deterioration of relations with Turkish counterparts will require an educational process overall for the government.

**You have voiced a vision of a united Caucasus. Turkey has at various times put forward ideas of platforms to bring together countries of the region. What needs to change in the region for such visions to be realistic?**

*“My vision is simple: we need to turn an arc of crisis into an area of cooperation. The problem is that this vision is not shared by everybody, especially in Moscow...”*

Our region needs progress and progress can only be achieved through cooperation. Georgia needs to get back on track and refocus on its neighbors. Armenia understands that at this level of development they need modern communications and for this, we need some sort of settlement. I think Azerbaijanis can also make move towards a settlement.

Without changing or even questioning existing borders, I believe that the Northern Caucasus should also have

much closer ties with the southern part of the Caucasus, and especially with Georgia. This is unavoidable, because Russia is having more problems. People-to-people relations will grow more and more. From that point of view, Tbilisi is a natural center for all these activities.

We never fully realized the potential for Batumi to be our bridge towards people of Georgian origin in Turkey, and other Turks. In the same way Tbilisi has this potential of reaching out to the Northern Caucasus and in general to the Caucasus.

My vision is simple: we need to turn an arc of crisis into an area of cooperation. The problem is that this vision is not shared by everybody, especially in Moscow... This is an ongoing fight, but a fight worth having since it is at the end of the day in the interest of all our countries.

**To conclude: in retrospect, what went wrong, or what might you and your team have done differently in the months and years leading up to last October’s election?**

When you look at things *a posteriori*, you always think that you could have done things differently but I don’t know how much it would have changed the story... Some people think that the election results can be explained by the last weeks of the campaign and especially by the prison scandal that was planned by the opposition,

as a decisive factor for the last days before the vote. I think there were deeper reasons leading to this result.

Ironically, the shrinking of our opposition after 2008 and the suicidal decision by many of then opposition leaders to reject their seats in the Parliament, damaged us badly too eventually. We gained a dominant political space, but we lost shape at the end due to the lack of a strong opposition inside the institutions.



Secondly, after a very intense and often dramatic decade, a form of fatigue had emerged in the country, which is quite natural. Since 2003, our people have been through war, embargoes, constant threats, dramatic reforms, virulent rallies, and the repercussions of the global economic crisis.

Thirdly, we got carried away with the emphasis on law enforcement. We had zero tolerance policy on crimes and corruption, and as it worked we went further, with zero tolerance and harsh penalties on violations of any kind, from seat belt enforcement to tax evasion. The changes we demanded were good, and spectacular results followed, but we went probably too far and too quick on this issue of zero tolerance...

The partially fabricated prison tapes fell on fertile ground because of these factors and others, including the amount of money poured into the political game and the repeated threats coming from the North in case our party would secure majority again... The results were disappointing for me and my party, but I saw it also as a chance to root even deeper the Georgian democracy and to validate all our efforts during the last 10 years in order to create a modern and open European country.

Unfortunately recent attacks on institutions, on opposition, on media and on basic freedoms have tempered my optimism and obliged me to express my concern—several times—as a grantor of the institutions. But I am sure that at the end of the day, the Georgian people will make sure that democracy prevails.



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