

INTERVIEW WITH IRAKLI ALASANIA: THE DEFENSE OF GEORGIA*

In this exclusive interview with the editor-in-chief of TPQ, Georgia's Defense Minister relates Georgia's vision of Euro-Atlantic integration and outlines the strategy of the current government for overcoming challenges stemming from conflict with Russia. Besides the multifaceted collaboration between Turkey and Georgia, he elaborates on the trilateral framework of relations developing between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The Minister notes the importance of Ankara's support for Georgia in NATO, and the unique niche role Turkey can play with regard to Georgian-Abkhaz rapprochement.



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There is a perception of an upsurge of Russia in the region. There is also a sense that despite the friendly gestures by Tbilisi, Russia is advancing its positions *vis-à-vis* Georgia, most recently with the barbed-wire fence along the occupation line for example. Is Georgia losing ground?

Well first of all, our new more pragmatic policy towards Russia is not something that we thought would yield results in a matter of months or even a year. This is a strategic decision from our side. In order to achieve our goals of being a part of the European family and the Atlantic community, we need to normalize our relationship with Russia, or at least diffuse the rhetoric, the tension. We did not have any illusion that Russia would change its positions, its policies towards Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali region, the territorial integrity of Georgia, or Georgia's integration to NATO.



Our goal is to not give any pretext for Russians to attack us politically, to attack us *via* escalation, so I think pragmatism indeed provided us with the options to start a trade relationship with Russia. I think it is always better to talk and have something on the agenda rather than not to talk and be only involved in military rhetoric and confrontation.

So this policy has not changed even though Russia has not responded adequately to our steps. But we understand, we are mindful, that these unilateral steps of ours may have to continue. Because I think first of all Georgia needs to have as much as possible a stable environment, to have the space in which we can demonstrate to Abkhazians and Ossetians that we have changed. And we want to reintroduce a new Georgia to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, a Georgia which is forthcoming, which takes into consideration the legitimate concerns of the Abkhaz and the Tskhinvali regions' people. In an atmosphere of heightened confrontation with Russia, we will not be able to do this. So, what's happening now on the other side, like the barbed-wire fence in Dvani and other places.

This week we got news that the Olympics main torch carrier will be a Russian military pilot who bombed Georgian villages in 2008. This again demonstrates that the Russian political leadership is still caught up in the confrontation mentality – the Cold War mentality. This is something that tests

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our political leadership, whether we are solid in our decision to achieve our goal with these pragmatic measures. I think all of this gives Georgia the upper-hand in the international community. Because we are now looking mature and forthcoming, and Russia looks immature and emotional. That is exactly the goal Georgia set for itself. The Germans, French, Dutch, and others had questions about whether Georgia is stable enough, mature enough to be brought closer to NATO or EU. We can now make a completely opposite argument.

Now, on the question of whether we are forgotten. We are not. The statement of the Secretary General of NATO was, I think, very strong, together with Catherine Ashton and the State Department. All of this demonstrates that Georgia has solid support from Europe. This is in line with our policy of pragmatism with Russia. We are also gaining ground in our relationship and advancement toward NATO. Georgia is a provider of security, the top contributor in the world per capita to Afghanistan. The trust among our soldiers, Turkish soldiers, U.S. soldiers, is the highest ever. So this means Georgia is a credible partner and that it is getting stronger.

Now let’s get to the political environment. Georgia performed its first ever transfer of power through elections last year. This year’s election will be even more exemplary. What does it mean? Georgia is maturing its political system. Georgia is in lead in the region, by advancements and progress toward NATO, towards EU. And I think nothing, not even these provocations, will derail us from our commitment. We are not going to be provoked. We will end up an integral part of Europe, embedded in the heart of Europe. These tests we are subject to make us stronger.

Has Georgia’s concentration in terms of its Western vocation shifted from NATO to the EU? In August this year, the president said that in 2008 he had offered to Moscow that, in return for help in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia could be willing to give up its NATO aspirations. Given the complex relationship between democratization, territorial integrity, EU versus NATO integration, do you find that emphasizing the EU integration dimension is a better idea?

First, let me say that this was a bad bargain. When the president proposed this to Russia, I was in the government, and it was not agreed on with the political leadership. You cannot go that road. Period. And it would never have worked.

We see the avenues of being a part of Europe as the European Union and NATO. Both have political importance for us. Down the road when we have a Membership Action Plan (MAP) or other advancement towards NATO, then we are going to have to discuss how NATO's collective defense agreement will deal with the territorial occupation of Georgia. Creative solutions to this are possible but we are not talking about them now because we are not yet there.

What is on the agenda now is a solid step forward – whether it is going to be a membership action plan or something else, we are talking about an instrument that will ensure that Georgia is rewarded because this is a country that is reforming with a maturing political system, and performing by providing security. There should be advancement because we are advancing in meeting the criteria. Another reason for NATO to move along with Georgia is because of the signal it gives to aspirant countries: if you perform, you are invited to join. And the signal to Russia is that no matter what they did in 2008, they will never derail an aspirant nation from being a part of whatever they want.

As for the European Union, we will initial the association agreement next month in Vilnius, and by September next year, there is a high probability we will sign this association agreement. We feel there is a sense of urgency in Europe due to this new environment in which Russia is flexing its muscles. Combined with its performance, when a country like Georgia has 75-80 percent approval rate for European and NATO aspirations, the EU needs to seriously consider the performance we are showing in moving forward. So I think, in strange ways, Russia helped us in advancing our integration into Europe and NATO.

Along those lines, if the EU gets Georgia right, what kind of an effect do you think this might have on Armenia, and Azerbaijan?

I think in any way it is going to have a very positive effect. Even though Armenians now made a decision that it is in their best interest to look to the Eurasian Customs Union, I see them in the future as an integral part of regional security, and part of a wider-Europe. I know them, I am dealing with them. As neighbors we have traditionally, historically had a good relationship. And I feel like their place is also within a wider Europe. Regardless of tactical decisions they make at this point, I believe strategically the Armenians' place is in Europe.

And our strategic ally Azerbaijan is already a country, together with Turkey, that we have a relationship with, without which we cannot survive. This is something that we fully understand. Not only with energy and other projects but in general, the future depends on the wider cooperation these three regional countries have forged. We are going beyond, for example, just economic relationships, and we want to expand this to the military industry as well as foreign policy. Also, military policies need to be coordinated more effectively, and this is what we want to achieve in the future.

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In a recent interview you mentioned the potential for a stronger trilateral collaboration on the defense industry level... What would this look like?

I have seen the military capabilities that Azerbaijan is now building. I have also been very impressed with the advance of Turkey’s military and hardware industry. We can have military joint ventures of industry using the 31st factory here. [Aviation Factory No. 31 in Tbilisi, in September 2013 re-named after Alexander Kartveli] is capable of being the main factory... and there are certain sectors where Georgia has unique niche capabilities. We already have delegations meeting to create something mutually beneficial. We are going to see each other in Brussels at the end of this month on a ministerial level as well, where we might have some additional meetings.

In particular between 2009 and 2011, relations between Russia and Turkey intensified. There seemed to be an idea in Ankara that Turkey could advance its influence in the region with collaboration with Russia. The last couple of years have seen more divergences emerge and a reality check on the Turkish side. How have these ebbs and flows affected Georgia’s strategic thinking and security considerations?

Well, what happened in 2008 of course has affected Georgia’s existential security interests and threat perceptions fundamentally. I would say that Turkey was playing, or trying to play, a role that would inherently safeguard Georgian interests as well. Because I was talking at that time to Turkish officials and they were trying to fill in the security void that had been created with the somewhat retreat from Georgia of the West. Though Georgia was not left alone humanitarially and diplomatically, there was certainly a void that needed to be filled. There were also some suggestions from Ankara that at that time did not work out. But I always felt that Turkey had not only its own interests but also Georgia’s interests in mind.

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Both our economic relationship and the military-to-military cooperation that we have had with Turkey for 20 years demonstrate very solid ties. No matter what the Russian position towards Georgia is, it will never affect the Georgia-Turkey relationship. I was convinced by this when I was in Turkey this year. We have a strategic defense cooperation that not only includes education but also military-to-military cooperation. So I do not see any threats to the bilateral relationship between Georgia and

Turkey, even in the sensitive issue of Abkhazia for example. I always thought that Turkey had unique niche role to play in Georgian-Abkhaz rapprochement. It is a very sensitive issue, and only Turkey can play this niche role, which is unrealized at this point. Turkey offered a number of times, but we, Abkhazians and Georgians, were not ready probably. But I think in the future Turkey will play a unique role in reintroducing the new Georgia to the Abkhaz and the new Abkhaz to Georgians. So, there is a huge potential role that Turkey will play in regional conflict resolution in the future.

To elaborate on this point you made, there are diverging perspectives on the issue of Turkey’s trade with Abkhazia. Some argue that Turkish trade with Abkhaz counterparts is a way to reduce the reliance of Abkhazia on Russia, particularly if it is negotiated in a way that enables a Georgian customs officer to officiate the transaction. But I have also heard the argument that Russia will only benefit from this as Moscow can contain the exchanges at a level in which Moscow’s burden to subsidize Abkhazia is lessened, yet Russia’s political and economic hold on Abkhazia is not loosened. What is your view?

I know the region, I have worked with them. I do not think there is a threat at all, and I think it is in the best interests of the Georgian state to use the goodwill of Turkey to include it in a confidence-building and rapprochement process. And the only way to do this is through wise economic and trade instruments. This was my position in 2005 and nothing has changed since then. And I think pretty soon we are going to have this opportunity. When we start working on this, new opportunities will present themselves. Turkey is a key player in my understanding. This is an unrealized potential that Turkey has, which they will use in the future.

With regard to the conflicts, a humility seems to have set in in Europe. Does Europe have a coherent strategy beyond containment, or could they?

First of all, they are doing their best on the security side. The EU monitoring mission is on the ground and these are the only international eyes to act as a deterrent that we have on the ground. So I hope that the mission will be extended in future years as well, especially given how Russians have been behaving now in occupied territories. The other side is of course that we need to wait until the Olympics are done because with the tightening of security measures, there is less and less access to the region available to European NGOs.



It is in Georgia's best interest that, wherever Georgia cannot perform by itself in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, our partners expand their reach. We should not be afraid of building the capacity of and de-isolating these societies. When they have the chances we did for 20 years to see how democracy works, how democracy can safeguard their security concerns, a realization that this is better than staying under Russian occupation will come to them step by step. This will ease our talks with them as well. So de-isolating is part of our long-term strategy. But we have to wait until the end of the Olympics. Currently security is too high.

I am also concerned that there is going to be a very sensitive period after the Olympics and before the NATO summit. I think there is going to be a more aggressive attempt from the opposing side to provoke Georgia, make Georgia look weak, vulnerable, and emotional – and we are mindful of that as Georgians. We are preparing for this. I want to be crystal clear that we will never give any pretext to anybody –military, security, or other parts of Russia– to provoke us. We are that serious about not being provoked and continuing what we are doing. But we need solid vocal support and attention from regional countries, such as Turkey and of course EU and NATO leaders. They need to demonstrate that they are watching, ensuring Georgia is behaving and performing, but also watching Russia, to ensure there is no destructive moves from there. This is something we would expect from even Turkey as a big, I would say, regional superpower.

Can Turkey do more than it is to facilitate Georgia's NATO process?

Absolutely. Turkey is a European and NATO country, and one of the biggest contributors to regional and Euro-Atlantic security. And they can be one of the platforms for the Georgian agenda, in NATO – this is something that we are talking about with my colleague, the Defense Minister of Turkey. They are supportive. They were very vocally supportive in the last NATO-Georgia Council on a ministerial level, and I am very grateful to the Turkish side for this. And I am pretty sure that they understand that Turkey will be better off if Georgia will be in NATO.

There were four countries you mentioned in a recent interview as being most important for Georgia's security. We talked about Azerbaijan and Turkey; the other two were Israel and Estonia. Could you explain how these two countries relate to Georgian security?

First I will start with Estonia. Estonia is a tested, solid strategic partner for us, as are the other Baltic states. I do not want to single out only Estonia. All three countries have been very generous in providing assistance, sharing their expertise, as well as their experience in advancing their interests towards NATO...

I have been to all three countries recently. We are working together with Estonia and the other Baltic states on education, military expertise, and how to build together an effective reserve system. I cannot overemphasize the importance of these three countries, especially Estonia, in building Georgian institutions. Cybersecurity is one of the main issues that we are working with them on, and other special equipment that is needed to safeguard security and defense.

For a millennia, we have been enjoying a strategic friendship with Israel. I am going to have an official trip soon to Israel, which I am looking forward to. And I am glad to see so many Israeli business people coming to Georgia for business – if Jews are actually investing, it means that we have potential. So this is a good sign.

I am looking forward to advancing our military cooperation in the near future because it went through some difficulties after 2008. I think we are now pretty much at the level of cooperation where there is no closed subject between us in military terms.

There have been some assessments that in the period of co-habitation, coordination between various security agencies had deficiencies. Do you expect improvement in this sense after the upcoming presidential elections?

I would say we have dramatically improved the situation. The Minister of Internal Affairs and Minister of Defense are coordinating, training together. We had a big, integrated training just a month ago. Our special operation forces and the special units have already performed several joint training and operations. So, on that level, our situation has dramatically improved.

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And of course I think in the future, after the elections, we need to improve the political decision-making body and crisis management institution on a higher level. Unfortunately, the previous governments over nine years did not develop institutional decision-making or crisis management. That is what led to their tremendous mistakes. So the first thing we need to do after this election, after the so-called co-habitation in the executive is over, is to establish solid, effective decision-making, on a strategic level and on a crisis management operational level.

Do you think there is a social cohesion problem in Georgia – in terms of religious and ethnic minorities and along the lines of liberal versus traditional, conservative social visions?

There are these issues in every society. We have been around at least three millennia and we have co-habited with other nations and other religions here, but there are always problems. And I think Georgian policy makers should be more aware of that. That is something we, Georgia, lack in general. We think that constitutional amendments or constitutional provisions are enough to provide equal opportunities for everybody, which is of course not true. Both effective policies and leadership are needed. Political leaders and government officials need to demonstrate the understanding of equal opportunities for everybody. I do not think we are in bad shape, but there is a lot of ground to cover in the future. I do not assess dramatically any actual past event, such as the problems that were intensively televised. We need to deal with them with a solid mind, and I think the issues will be possible to overcome. The main thing is for people of every religious and ethnic group to have the opportunity to see themselves as a part of Georgia, and see themselves as a part of building a stronger Georgia. The previous government has done some work on this and we are going to carry on and advance this.