

**CENTER FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)**

STATESMEN'S FORUM: THE HONORABLE DAVID BAKRADZE

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**SPEAKERS:
DAVID BAKRADZE,
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ANDREW KUCHINS: Good morning. Welcome to CSIS. I am Andy Kuchins, director of the Russian-Eurasia program here. And it is a great pleasure to be chairing this Statesmen's Forum and hosting the head of the Georgian Parliament, Mr. David Bakradze. Mr. Bakradze is a longtime friend here at CSIS, most recently speaking here in September of 2008. It is nice to welcome you back here, sir, in a somewhat more calm moment than 11 months ago.

Mr. Bakradze is one of the truly most distinguished and experienced Georgian diplomats and politicians. He has formerly served as minister of foreign affairs and served in a number of positions, including being involved in 2007 as chief negotiator for Abkhazia and South Ossetian affairs. And for four or 5 years in the earlier part of this decade, he held a number of positions, particularly dealing with security issues – military security for Georgia.

Since time is short, I won't spend much more time with introducing our very distinguished guest, except to note I was rather pleased to see that you have named as graduate of the month in March of 2009 from the German Marshall Center, a distinction that is maybe not always noted when you speak here. He is here on one of his regular trips to Washington. And we are really pleased that you have been able to take up some time in your busy schedule.

I know he has met with Gen. Jones of the National Security Council and Bill Burns in the State Department and a number of other leading figures in the Obama administration. And we look forward very much to what you have to say today about the current challenges that Georgia faces.

DAVID BAKRADZE: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much, Andrew, for this introduction and kind words. I don't know how experienced I am. But at least, you know, it was very pleasant to listen to you, how nicely you introduced me. And it is really a pleasure to be back here. Indeed, the moment, I think, is more calm than it was 11 months ago. But still, we have challenges at every moment like any country. Georgia is not an exception.

So I will try to concentrate on a few areas where we see – I mean, which we see are important for the country at the moment. And then, I hope there will be questions and I am ready to take those questions. So the first area where I would like to concentrate is related to Georgia's internal politics and internal political developments, because for many of you who have been following Georgian issues, this was truly a turbulent and very dynamic political year in the country with lengthy and quite massive opposition protests, demonstrations in the streets of Tbilisi, and that was broadly covered by international media.

So what is our assessment of that? I mean, what happened this year in the streets of Tbilisi, I mean, is very important for Georgia because of a few different reasons. In order to understand that, I mean, let me give you a very brief historic overview of some specifics of Georgian political mentality. And these specifics is that in Georgian political mentality, the

street demonstrations and street actions are seen as the only and best way how changes can be delivered in the country and how changes may occur. And this has its own reasons.

Starting from 1988, every change in the country in internal politics occurred as a result of street rallies and demonstrations. So in 1988, we had huge anti-Soviet protests in the streets of Tbilisi. Then, Soviet Union disappeared. Well, not only because of that, of course, but in the minds of Georgians, I mean, the disillusion of Soviet Union is very closely associated with these huge anti-Soviet rallies in the streets of Tbilisi. Of course, that contributed to that. But, of course, there were other reasons as well, but still. That was the first result of street demonstrations – disappearance of Soviet Union – in our mentality.

Then we had first elected president, Gamsakhurdia, who had to flee in 1992 – 1991, sorry – as a result of the same demonstrations in the street. And that time, it turned violent and we had civil war and civil confrontation. So the first elected president had to flee. Then we had second elected president, Shevardnadze, who had to resign as a result of the same street demonstrations and protests in 2003. That time, it was peaceful, so that time it was the well-known Rose Revolution.

Then, we had third elected president, Saakashvili, who had to step down and appoint snap presidential elections in 2007, as a result of the same street actions and demonstrations the very same place. And that is called Rustaveli Avenue. That is the main avenue. And everything, what I described, is happening on the small spot in front of the building of parliament, which is the very sacred place of Georgian politics.

So then 2007, Saakashvili had to step down because of the clash between police and demonstrators and appoint snap elections. So basically, we had three presidents, three elected presidents. One had to flee, second had to resign, third had to step down as a result of three demonstrations. So in our mentality, the street action is seen as something, you know, most efficient and effective whenever one wants to conduct internal politics. And that is the problem. I mean, the problem is not – the demonstrations are not a problem, per se, because that is the nature or the way how people express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. And that is part of democratic life.

But the problem starts when these demonstrations become the main and only tools, how politics are conducted. And then, it is problematic because it also explains few reasons, few specifics of Georgian internal politics. Why one is – I mean – very bad tradition of deep polarization between different political forces and in the society in Georgia.

And the reason for polarization – one of the reasons is exactly this tradition of radical street protests because, you know, when part of the society stands in the streets and part of the society remains in the houses, that is the way how it is polarized. And this tradition of aggressive and active street protests, of course, leads to polarization and leads to the split of the society. That is one of the reasons.

The second bad habit is, I mean, quite radical behavior of Georgian politicians. Again, you know, if your main – if your main audience is people standing in the street, you have to be

tough; you have to be radical in your statements. You have to prove that you are the guy – you are the tough guy, you know. Plus the people in the street – crowd in the street usually does not accept moderate and reasonable rhetoric. What they want to hear, they want to hear something real and special for which they stand in the street.

So, I mean, for many Georgian politicians, you know, addressing people in the street, I mean, was the reason and is the reason of being radical in their statements and missing some communicative skills when it come to, I mean, real political life within the institutions or political consultations within the institutions.

So there are a number of other reasons why we believe that, I mean, this way of conducting politics is quite immature for a country and at a certain point, our politics should move up and upgrade to a normal political life, which means that normal political process within the institutions. And the main risk related to this street action mentality is that any political leader who has ambition and power to bring 10 or 20,000 people in the street in front of this building of parliament then has an ambition that he or she is the one who should, I mean, define how things develop in the country.

And we have, of course, nonstop chain of these political leaders who can and who want to bring people to the street. So, I mean, many, many things, which happen in Georgia in internal politics all the time. This internal turbulence is this polarization. I mean, many other things are rooted in this tradition of delivering changes from the street.

So what happened this year was another attempt, you know, to continue this story and to have second-time elected third president, you know, resign again or step down again as a result of street rallies. So in that sense, it was very important. It was a test for Georgian state, whether we remained – whether state remained as it was a few years ago or state became stronger and more vibrant, so that state and political system and bureaucracy could survive this kind of shock.

And what is very important, it appeared that, you know, state apparatus, bureaucracy, political system, it survived this kind of shock because what happened this spring was the lengthiest protest demonstrations in the memory. Even during the Rose Revolution, we didn't have such a lengthy period of street demonstrations and rallies. So, I mean, it was really a very important test of maturity for the Georgian political system and for the state. And it survived. So in that sense, it was very, very important.

And the results, how these demonstrations ended I believe is very important for the future. The way that they ended peacefully and the way that they ended without a major compromise, it was very important. And I will explain why. Because, you know, this is a good deterrence, good prevention for the future. So if any politician today decides to go as radical as, I mean, we have seen this spring or in previous years, he will think twice because now everybody sees that bringing people to the street is not enough.

Now everybody sees that blocking streets is not enough. Now everybody sees that standing in the street, even for 120 days as it lasted, is not enough. And there is something more

necessary to be successful and to deliver results. So that is a very good deterrence not only for current non-parliamentary opposition, but for everybody.

I mean, at certain point, when we as a majority go to opposition, I will remember experience of spring 2008. And I will really think twice before organizing something like that again because then the question is if I cannot deliver something out of these demonstrations, why should I bring these people to the street because then it discredits me. So for every politician in the country, I mean, in current opposition, in future opposition, this is a good lesson learned that there is something else needed and it no longer works like it worked in 2003 or 1991 or 1988. So in that sense, it was a very good lesson.

On the other hand, you know, this lesson is not enough. And I mentioned that, you know, it is good that it has ended without a major compromise. And I will explain this point. So our objective as a government or as a majority was not only to end these rallies peacefully, but it was tactical objective. The strategic objective was to end these rallies in a way which would serve as a deterrence for the future and which would serve as an example and lesson for all politicians that this is not enough and the way should be chosen.

So for that, one thing is that these rallies ended peacefully and without compromise. But second thing is that alternatives should be offered because without alternative, this lesson would not be learned and will not be learned. So this alternative is dialogue. And we talked so much about dialogue. And dialogue – if one counts how many times I use the word, “dialogue,” in those five months. I think that was the most frequently used word. There were a lot of jokes and a lot of stories and even some songs, you know, about this word, “dialogue,” in Georgia folk culture because, you know – but that is what it was.

I mean, and the lesson learned from the street protests that it is no longer successful has to be converted into another lesson that what generates results is normal political process, which is based on dialogue. And if politicians want to achieve something, they should learn not to stand in the street all the time, but to sit around the same table and talk to each other. It is not pleasant at all. I mean, I acknowledge that. And I have to do a lot of that because of my position. And I should say that it is not pleasant at all and it is not easy at all. It is very difficult. But it is the only way because people should learn this is how normal political life is conducted – I mean, dialogue, political consultations and political process.

And I think we are on the right way, the right path with that regard because what we offered before these rallies, during and especially after the rallies was an issue-based dialogue on certain, specific issues. And there was from the beginning part of opposition, which agreed to be part of this process. And now we have positive trend that some parties belonging to this non-parliamentary or radical opposition, as they are sometimes called, are also joining this process because they saw that these street protests were fruitless. So now they decided that they will join this political process.

So what we are talking about some major things, which we offered. One point was constitutional reform because in Georgia, there have been continuous debates for years and years that Georgian system of checks and balances is not really well-balanced. And the presidential

institute is too strong; parliament is too weak. So there have been a lot of political parties, opposition parties arguing that, you know, there is a certain disbalance (sic) in terms of checks and balances in our constitution.

And the offer was that okay, this is an issue, which we can discuss and which we should discuss, but let's do it in normal way. So let's set up a structure, which will work on the constitutional amendment and which will elaborate a new model of checks and balances. So what the offer was basically to create, to establish a special constitutional commission to invite all political parties to that commission, to invite civil society and NGOs and to invite lawyers and academicians.

And the right way was not to, I mean, talk all the time about this disbalance from the street, but to sit in the room, to invite all these respected people, politicians, civil society, academicians, to invite all these people and to give them time and mandates to work out the new model of checks and balances.

So okay, this commission is there. People are there. They sit, they work and whatever their recommendations are, then we as a majority from the beginning committed ourselves that we will adopt that through the parliament, in the parliament. So I think that is a good example how issues are solved and how the good working process should be designed.

So sometimes I am asked, what will be the recommendation of that commission? I have no idea. And I should not have any idea because it is not my commission. This is commission which works itself. So whatever it is, I may agree, I may not agree. But it will be politically suicidal for us not to accept what this commission recommends later. So I mean, by that, we factually commit ourselves that we will agree.

So every political party now has a chance to go there to prove that their vision is right, okay, and come up with recommendations. I mean, there is overwhelming consensus that parliament should be stronger. And I think that one of the, I mean, first recommendations of this commission will be to make parliament stronger. But when it comes to details, again, I cannot say at the moment what will be the details. I mean, which rights will be added to parliament, how it will be balanced, what will be position of president and government vis-à-vis parliament. This is something, which should be decided inside commission.

But I support and I agree that parliament should be stronger. And I think there is the overwhelming understanding in the country in majority and in opposition that strengthening parliament is good for Georgian democracy. The rest – let the commission work, let them come out with conclusions and we will accept and we will adopt. And I think it is a good way to resolve this longstanding issue of years and years of continuous dispute. What is the place of president and what is the role of the president in the political life? I mean, this is very civilized and democratic way to decide, to solve and to, I mean, remove that issue from our agenda.

The second issue, which also has a longstanding history of disputes, is election court and in general election system and election environment in the country. And again, I mean, what we offered was to set up a working group to invite representatives of all interested political parties,

to invite civil society and NGOs, to invite international organizations who work on elections like Council of Europe, like OSC, like Venice Commission and to sit down and jointly reach a compromise. What could be the best election model for Georgia? And to jointly update and change our election code in a way that it is much better in terms of meeting international standards. And that group is working as well.

And I think that is another good example of how issues can be resolved in civilized way because what was happening previously was that, I mean, political parties, you know, go into elections and later boycotting results of elections, saying that our electoral system and electoral environment is bad and then boycotting the results, which I think is very wrong way of changing things. I mean, if political party boycotts the results and doesn't recognize results of elections, it means that basically, the political party boycotts voices, words of its own supporters, which is not the right thing to do.

So the right way is, let's sit down and let's do it in normal civilized way through the process. And I hope that this working group will come up with concrete recommendations in November, so that this comes to parliament in November and we will be able to adopt these amendments of electoral code before end of year, so that we have first test, which is local elections in the end of spring, in the end of May 2010, which means that if we adopt these amendments before the end of year, we will have enough time for training of officials and for implementing this recommendation. So that will be the first test.

And the intention is to approach these local elections in a way, which will be acceptable for everybody. Of course, I am not naïve and I don't think that everybody will be happy. And there are differences, clearly. I mean, there are two blocks of questions: one, technical and second, political. In terms of technical questions, there are no contradictions. And everybody agrees that there are some technical shortcomings in our election code, which should be fixed, which should be corrected. And those are recommendations of international organizations as well. And that is very clear.

When it comes to political side, then we may have differences because there are some parties who, for example, I mean, think that single-minded constituencies' system is better for the country. There are other parties, which think that the multi-minded regional elite system is better for the country. Both systems are very much perfectly democratic. And it is a matter of political taste and it is a matter of which party likes which system because obviously, parties prefer systems where they have higher chances.

So I mean, we may not agree with everybody what is the best system for Georgia. But two conditions, at least it should be democratic and second, it should be accepted by majority of political players. So if we have a system, which is democratic and which is accepted by majority of players, I think then this group meets its objective and it is successful. So this is second example, these two major reforms, constitution and election.

There are also a number of other initiatives I will not go through in details. If you ask me, I can answer later. Just to explain to you, the main philosophy behind all these initiatives like inviting opposition to attend the national security council meetings and to participate in

decision-making and some other things, you know. The major idea of these initiatives is to create an inclusive system because so far, you know, the traditional polarization, which I mentioned, in Georgian society and political elite. The polarization is very dangerous for the country because this polarization means that there are people, there are political parties, groups who feel that they have no place in the system, who feel that they are cornered or they are marginalized.

And then, you know, they start to act in a very decisive and radical way. There should be no kamikaze and I once called this kind of parties kamikaze politicians because they feel they have nothing to lose and they can just blow up the system for the sake of their own interest. And I was then criticized by opposition. Well, being kamikaze is not bad itself, but in politics, it is dangerous, it is dangerous.

So we don't need these kind of political groups. And the only way to have political stability is to have an inclusive and open system where every political party will have its place. And the main idea, main philosophy behind all those reforms, which we are doing now, is exactly creation of open political system, where every party will have a say and every party will have a place.

And, I mean, to help you understand why we do that, I mean, we are not afraid of strong opposition because UNM – “National Movement” – as the ruling party or majority party is very strong. And that is confirmed by all opinion polls and just recent opinion poll conducted by Gallup International Conference, again that UNM has very strong positions in the country. And it remains the strongest political party far away of any competitor. So we are not afraid of competition and we are not afraid of strong opposition.

What is dangerous for the country is cornered opposition, opposition which feels that they have nothing to lose and they can do everything, including crazy, erratic things, just for the sake of their own survival. That is dangerous because that can damage the country. So I mean, our objective is to attract, to bring entire spectrum of opposition inside the process, to open the system to create inclusive system, so that – I mean, that is the precondition. So openness is precondition of stability. And the only way to achieve this openness is through reforms and through increasing rights of opposition. And we understand it.

So basically, by strengthening opposition, we make system more stable. And by strengthening opposition, we strengthen ourselves because we are also part of that stable system. So I think that is good to understand why we do it. These are not reforms for the sake of reforms. These are not reforms for me to come and report to you that we are doing something, so we are good guys.

I mean, we are doing that for our own sake because by opening the system and by making opposition stronger, we make opposition more responsible as well. Strength never comes alone. It always comes with responsibility. And responsible and strong opposition is not dangerous for the country. It is good for the country and it is essential element of political balance in the country.

So that is the philosophy. I will not go into some other technical description of reforms. If you are interested, I can tell you later. And very briefly, because I am already too long, I am afraid, security, which remains a main challenge for Georgia. And security is related to few factors. One is, of course, the Russian presence on Georgian territory and on occupied territories. And there, I am afraid, there is not much progress or there is no progress at all.

And basically, French foreign minister, Mr. Kouchner, who was in Moscow about a month ago, in his statement, he very openly made an assessment that Russians failed to implement the ceasefire agreement, which was signed on 12th of August. And that was signed, by the way, by Russian President Medvedev as well. So basically, Russians failed to implement their own commitment under the signature of their own president.

And it is a very simple judgment because, for example, this ceasefire agreement obliges Russia to withdraw troops from both territories, from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What we instead of withdrawal, we see military buildup and we see installation of permanent military bases. So I mean, it is very, very easy judgment that Russia is not only not implement this agreement, but they act in contradiction to that agreement by installing military bases, by building up permanent military presence in both regions, by increasing the number of troops. That is all contradictory to the ceasefire agreement.

So the one key objective of international community and of Georgian diplomacy is to start implementing the ceasefire agreement, which means gradual reduction of Russian troops on both territories, which means beginning of political negotiations on the security modalities of these two territories and that it gives ground for further progress because without beginning of demilitarization process, no political negotiations can be successful.

And there is also another component of security, which is related not only to occupied territories, but which is related more generally to Georgian-Russian relations. And, I mean, from what we see in public debates in Moscow, there is a very strong sense of unfinished business in Moscow when it comes to Georgia. And we see a lot of public debates on Russian media outlets on TV, you know, among politicians, among high-level officials talking all the time that basically Russia has not met its objectives vis-à-vis Georgia.

So Georgia is still there. These crazy Georgians are still Western-oriented. They still want to join NATO. They still want to allow Americans to come to the post-Soviet space, which is Russia's exclusive area of influence. So at the end of the day, Russia's objectives are not met. There are a lot of discussions in Moscow, public discussions about that.

So the way how Russia should solve Georgian problem – and this is their definition to solve Georgian problem is – they invented a very interesting definition, which is desovereignization of Georgia, which further explained means division of Georgian state into few sub-states, which means that there will be no Georgian state any longer, but there will be few Georgian sub-states, few regions like, for example, if California or Texas and New Jersey – if U.S. was desovereignized into 50 states, something like that.

And then all these sub-states will, of course, based on their goodwill, join Russian Federation. So that is the final solution of Georgian problem. I mean, however naïve or however outdated or however stupid it sounds, it is a matter of, I mean, discussions and debates in Moscow among very high-level politicians, well-known politicians and high-level officials.

So that, of course, leaves a lot of uncertainty, sense of uncertainty in Georgian public and in Georgian leadership as well. So what should we expect from Russia? And that is the key question now, how to secure Georgia from this sense of unfinished business in Russia and from the temptation in Kremlin to finish this business and to bring this business to the end. That is the key question.

And there are a few ways for that, of course. I mean, one is the well-known pass through NATO integration. Second is strengthening elements of bilateral security and bilateral cooperation between United States and Georgia. So that is the ongoing question and that is the question, which we now discuss with our allies and friends. And that was one of the main points of my discussions here in Washington.

And why this unfinished business? Very briefly and I finish with that. I am sorry. There are two main reasons why there is this sense of unfinished business. One is related to energy because basically, despite this military operation last year, basically, Russians still do not control the energy supplies through Georgia. And geographically, Georgia is the bottleneck. So if one controls Georgia, it means that automatically Azerbaijan is cut off and Central Asia is cut off because for Azerbaijan and Central Asia, the only alternative way how they can supply their gas and oil to Europe not via Russia goes through Georgia.

So we are a tiny country. But because of our location, we really serve as a bottleneck for that. So if Georgia is controlled, it means that this alternative route is controlled. And it means that Azerbaijan is automatically cut off together with Central Asia. So it is very important if one wants to strengthen the energy tool and energy leverage over Europe, controlling Georgia, in that sense, is very important.

And the second reason of this unfinished business is related to political credibility because in the post-Soviet space, you know, the Russian relations with neighboring countries is very much based on the sense of fear – I mean, respect generated by fear, as they define it – and on the understanding that if any post-Soviet leader openly goes against Moscow, he will be punished immediately and he will have problems. And that is the model how Russians act vis-à-vis all post-Soviet countries.

But here is the bad example for them. They see that Saakashvili, I mean, openly went against Russia. There was even Russian-Georgian war. And this guy is still president. I mean, this guy still talks about NATO. This guy still, I mean, travels to Washington and New York. So why then other leaders should be afraid that they cannot survive? I mean, if Saakashvili survived, why not Aliyev? I mean, why Nazarbayev cannot survive? Why should then they listen and obey to what Russia says?

So in that sense, Georgia is a very bad example for – I mean, bad example under Russian definition – is a very bad example for other post-Soviet countries that country and political class can survive even after war with Russia. And that is a very bad example. And that is one of the reasons why there is this sense of unfinished business in Moscow and why they want to finish this business to demonstrate to everybody else that what they promise, they deliver. And you may remember that Mr. Putin publicly promised to hang Saakashvili, you know, by certain parts of his body, which I will not repeat, I mean, what Mr. Putin publicly said. But basically, he failed to do it.

And this failure influences his credibility in the eyes of other post-Soviet leaders. So, I mean, that is one of the reasons of unfinished business together with energy and together with other factors. So, I mean, securing Georgia from possible aggressive steps from the side of Russia is the key objective now. And this is what worries me mostly, security. Otherwise, I think that in terms of internal development, country stands on the right track. And if we manage to deliver concrete results out of all the reforms, which we are conducting now, in a few months, I think the country will be in a much better shape internally in terms of internal stability.

I mean, economically, we are doing fine. We have minus-two (percent) GDP this year. But it is relatively good compared to what the risks were and compared to other countries around us. So politically and economically, I think we are on the right track. So number-one concern remains security, security related to Russian illegal presence and security related to this sense of unfinished business in Moscow and how to secure country from both threats. This is the key task and this is one of the reasons of my stay here.

So thank you very much. I was too long. As a good politician, I always talk as much as possible until audience allows me. So usually, we use hammer and ring in parliament to stop people. But now the moderator is kind enough not to have neither hammer nor ring. (Laughter.) I overused my time. Thank you very much. And questions. (Applause.)

MR. KUCHINS: I knew I forgot something this morning. Mr. Bakradze, thank you very, very much for a very – for a comprehensive and, indeed, graphic description of some of the challenges that Georgia is facing today. I first of all want to acknowledge Amb. Vitilio (ph) from Georgia and thank him for allowing us to host this event and also acknowledge that he is our boss. And when you tell me that it is time that you have to go, we will conclude this. I would like to talk the prerogative of the chair to ask you the first question, if that is all right.

MR. BAKRADZE: Sure.

MR. KUCHINS: And it is in the security realm. The Russians have been having a lot of problems in the North Caucasus in the last few months, a lot of incidents and terrorist acts. And once again, they have been making accusations about Georgian harboring of al-Qaida terrorists, mercenaries, et cetera. This story has a familiar ring to it and a pattern that you had to deal with quite a bit 6, 7 years ago in your capacity as head of security issues office in the national security council in Georgia and before that, in the ministry of foreign affairs, when this dynamic and kinds of accusations were coming from the Russians quite a bit.

Those allegations have, of course, been vehemently denied by the Georgians, including yourself. What I am wondering is whether you see any evidence of the increase or return of foreign fighters and foreign involvement in the Northern Caucasus itself – not ones that are, you know, using Georgia, but whether that is an element that is contributing today to increased instability in the region?

MR. BAKRADZE: Okay, thanks. I mean, yes, there is this old story, again, that Georgia harboring terrorists, you know, fighting against Russia in Northern Caucasus, I mean, however naïve this kind of statements sound. I mean, in reality, they are dangerous for us because, I mean, we know that this kind of statements can create a pretext for Russian action against Georgia. So in that sense, they are very dangerous.

I mean, of course, there is no cooperation between Georgia and al-Qaida and cannot be because we have been fighting against al-Qaida in Iraq with full, brigade-sized force for 5 years. And now we are deploying our battalion in Southern Afghanistan. I mean, that is the most dangerous area where there will be fights between our guys and al-Qaida people. So, I mean, fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, I mean, fighting there, we cannot be harboring al-Qaida in Georgia, of course. I mean, that is nonsense by definition.

But why Russians do it? And it is not Russian politicians or State Duma members who are relatively free in their expressions. The people who made these accusations are, for example, Mr. Patrushev, who was 8 years FSB director and then now is the secretary of national security council. So he is a very high-ranking security official making it. So why?

I mean, the reasons are simple. A, Russia has to explain why situation in Northern Caucasus is very close to explosion again because many, many times, president, prime minister, other Russian officials had said that Northern Caucasus is no longer a problem and that is solved and that is resolved and this is the most peaceful part of Russia since the end of the last war in Chechnya.

So now they need to explain why it happens again. And situation in Northern Caucasus is very bad. It is just at the edge of explosion, especially in Ingushetia. It is very tense. There are daily shootings. There are daily kidnappings. There are daily attacks against policemen or other, I mean, representatives of local government. And there are daily skirmishes between governmental forces and rebels or boyviks or any way you define. So they have to explain why it happens again.

And, of course, who is guilty? Of course, not Moscow. I mean, somebody else should be guilty. And whenever they look around who is guilty, usually Georgia is the usual suspect for that. So, I mean, that is one to explain to internal public why it happens again. Of course, it is because of these bad Georgians – I mean, not because of mismanagement from the side of Moscow, you know; not because of the fact that they subcontracted the power to local criminals, like current president of Chechnya, you know, who is just assassinating people by order; not because of other mistakes they did there, but it is because of the Georgians again, of course. It is very easy way to explain to public.

And the second reason is that – and that is the most dangerous for us – that they keep creating the enemy from Georgia. And that is very dangerous for us because by these kinds of statements, but permanently keeping Georgia as enemy in the eyes of internal Russian public, basically, they create a pretext and justification for their possible aggressive action against Georgia.

And we usually know well how that is done. And the first stage of Russian aggression is always preparation of internal public opinion. And these kinds of statements serve as a preparation of public opinion. So there is overwhelming public opinion in Russia that Georgians are enemies, so they had a war with us. You know, they organized genocide against our citizens. Now they shelter terrorists who are blowing up houses and killing people in Northern Caucasus.

I mean, to create this image of country, which is dangerous for Russia, so that if Russia makes any aggressive action against Georgia, everybody internally will applaud that yes, this was important and this was good thing to do. So, I mean, these two reasons, why it happens and keeping Georgia as the Russian enemy. These two reasons, I think, make this kind of statements dangerous.

I don't think that there are – I don't have, I mean, precise information. But based on what I know and what we have, I mean, I don't think that there are significant numbers of foreign, I mean, people in Ingushetia or in Dagestan. I mean, unlike 1998, 1998, when they really had a lot of people coming from Gulf countries, coming from Middle East and fighting there against Russians – unlike that, now we have no evidence that there are lots of people like them. And I think all these people are busy fighting back in Afghanistan and Iraq. And by the way, we contribute for them being busy fighting there.

So, I mean, these people now have no resources and no time to come to Russia or to come to Ingushetia for that. So I don't think that this time foreign participation is a key factor. I think that it is really the internal problem. It is a problem because, I mean, the way how Russians manage to stabilize Northern Caucasus for a few years was that they subcontracted power to local criminal leaders. And they gave them full authority to do whatever they wanted to do for the exchange of being loyal to Kremlin.

But when you create this system, this system, at the end of the day, in a few years, of course, generates a lot of instability and problems. And I think Northern Caucasus is approaching now that point. I cannot say that it makes me happy. No, not at all. And last thing which I want to see, is war in Northern Caucasus and war next to our borders. Of course, we prefer to have stability there. And that is, by the way, one of the points.

And we continuously have been offering to Russia to cooperate on Northern Caucasus to have stability in Northern Caucasus. But unfortunately, Russia has been continuously ignoring our offer. And I still believe that the biggest foundation for Georgian and Russian common interests of cooperation may be cooperation on achieving stability in Northern Caucasus. That is our national interest – ours and Russia. Unfortunately, you know that has been always ignored by Russia, you know, because they were seeing their primary objective as playing zero-sum

game against us and playing zero-sum game against you through us. So they have been always ignoring our offer to help them in Northern Caucasus. Okay.

MR. KUCHINS: Thanks very much. Excellent answer. Conjures up the image of Ramzan “Frankenstein” Kadyrov. Yes, please identify yourself.

Q: John Scales, formerly with USAID in Central Asia. Thanks very much. It is always very direct and candid statements that you all make from Georgia. I appreciate it. My question is this. While you do not know what is going on with the constitutional commission, what is, in your view, the importance of the judiciary in the balancing that you were describing? Are there issues on the table regarding the judiciary? And I don’t mean to suggest an imposition of the U.S. sense of balance between three branches, but you made more reference to the balance between the legislative and the executive.

MR. BAKRADZE: Well, absolutely. I mean, yes, I cannot know the details, what the commission says. But in general, I said that making parliament stronger is an overwhelming political consensus on that. And, of course, other segment where there is political consensus is that judiciary should be independent and strong. But I will not say that that is achieved in Georgia already. I mean, I will say that – I can say that a lot has been done in that direction.

But I can also say that more remains to be done because, you know, a changing judiciary is much more difficult. It appears to be much more difficult than changing ministries or executive because basically what we have in 2003, it was the failed state. And it means that if there was a corruption in the ministries or in government or in parliament, it was the same level corruption in judiciary as well because everything was corrupted and everything was part of the same system.

But when we started to change, it is much easier to change ministers. It is much easier to change ministries and people, bureaucracy rather than changing judges because that is an independent system. And there you face dilemma. Either you continue having the old judges who are discredited and corrupted or you intervene and change. But then you intervene into independent judiciary.

So it is a dilemma, which should be addressed very carefully. And it takes usually much longer than transforming ministries or changing ministries. And another reason to that is mentality. And that should be – the perception matters a lot. When it comes to judiciary, public perception matters a lot, how people see judiciary and whether there is trust or not. And there is still a lot of mistrust towards Georgian judiciary in public. So that is the area where much remains to be done.

But I think we created – legally we created foundation for that because legally we made, I think, very important guarantees for judiciary independence. For example, previously, president was chairman of high council of justice and president was appointing judges, first and second-instance judges. Now we have completely removed president from that process. And now they are judges themselves who make every decision. And it is chairman of Supreme Court who

appoints judges and who makes disciplinary decisions. So president is completely removed from that.

We adopted the law on ex-parte communications, which means that judge who receives call from public official or from prosecutor or even from attorney trying to influence his decision on a concrete case under consideration. The judge is obliged to declare this call. And there are sanctions against the person who called. And now we are introducing further amendments into this law. And it will be criminalized, especially against public officials.

So if high-ranking public official calls to judge and tries to, I mean, influence his or her decision on specific case, that will be up to 3 years of imprisonment for that public official. So, I mean, legally, we made, I think, very right things. But when it comes to real life, it is a very difficult system to change. It is a very difficult perception to change. For example, now, you know, on the business disputes between state – or tax inspection or state and the private enterprises, in these business disputes, majority of cases – state loses majority of cases. But in public perception, you know, state always wins.

And there are a lot of things which should be changed. I mean, I don't say that, I mean, what we are doing is always 100 percent right. But I believe that all in all, the reforms and especially legal guarantees, which we give, are made in the right direction. Then, it is up to judges themselves to feel how strong guarantees they have and they should be independent. And it is up to public perception, which is changing, in that sense, very, very slowly. So judiciary is very much a work in progress.

MR. KUCHINS: Next, the middle here, Richard?

Q: Richard Weitz, Hudson Institute. Thank you. You gave a very comprehensive review of recent domestic developments in Georgia going back about two decades and a helpful summary of your relations with Russia. Since you are in the United States and since I am assuming you are having a dialogue with the Obama administration, I was wondering if you would just give us an overview of how you assess your relations with the administration.

MR. BAKRADZE: Well, I think there is clearly a continuity on Georgian policy in the United States. And that is something, which we, of course, very much appreciate – not only appreciate, but which is, I mean, instrumental or existential for keeping Georgia as a sovereign country. And these main elements of this policy have been designed in early '90s, when Georgia became independent during the first term of President Clinton, you know. So that is when this policy started.

Then it was further developed. Then it was picked up and developed by President Bush and his administration. And now we have every reason to believe that it will be continued and further developed by President Obama's administration because when I was here last time, I had a lot of – I mean, myself, questions to ask what will be the main principles of foreign policy and principles of U.S.-Georgian relations for the new administration.

Now I no longer ask those questions because at the level of principles, it is very clear. And President Obama himself, Vice President Biden, Secretary Clinton, they made very clear statements on many public occasions, both publicly and at the working level that Georgian policy will continue and supporting Georgia will continue.

And no other policies will take place at the expense of abandoning Georgia – I mean, more specifically, the reset and there were a lot of questions how improving relations with Russia will influence Georgia. But, you know, fortunately, even after reset, not every program is deleted in the computer, so Georgia is one of those programs, which was not deleted. And so we are still there. So at the level of principles, there are no questions. And it looks, I mean, excellent.

Now, when we come to below principles on the concrete details how this cooperation will continue, I mean, how this assistance will continue, there are still some questions. Not every detail is so far elaborated. And we understand that elaborating detailed policy needs time and, you know, one should not expect that Georgian policy will be the top foreign political priority for U.S., having a lot of challenges around the world.

So I mean, still this is an ongoing process. And one of the reasons of my being here today was asking these questions about details. What happens below those principles? What are the specific details? What are the specific ways how this support is materialized or institutionalized? So it is a work in progress. And I hope that within the next few months, it will be finished as well.

But again, what matters is that at the level of political principles, this assistance and cooperation remains. We have signed a special charter on strategic cooperation this January. Now we are working how to implement this charter. And I think it gives a very good ground for looking optimistically on those relations. And again, these are not just foreign affairs issue for us. This is an issue, which has, I mean, direct influence on Georgia's security and direct influence on Georgia's political development. So this is something very, very, very important for the state of Georgia.

MR. KUCHINS: Yes?

Q: Kristina Jeffers, National Democratic Institute. When you spoke about the changes to the electoral code, you said that the key litmus test would really be if the new system was democratic and accepted by a broad spectrum of the political players. Now, today's Georgian media is suggesting that the new direct election of mayors will take place only in Tbilisi and through a winner-takes-all system.

So my question to you is, is this a step backwards from Saakashvili's promises? And do you think that the new system will meet the litmus test that you laid out of being accepted by a broad spectrum of opposition parties in Georgia?

MR. BAKRADZE: Okay, basically, I failed to say that NDI is playing a very important role in that. If I knew that you were in this audience, I would say that from the beginning.

(Chuckles.) But NDI really did a lot, you know, in mediating among different political parties. So I can say immediately that winner-take-all system will not be there. I don't want to go into details, which may not be understandable or familiar for the rest of the audience. But the winner take all will not be there. And there is no problem as of the system of direct elections.

So what happens is that we have a system when city council is elected and then elected city council elects the mayor. And that is the system, which exists in many European countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. I mean, majority of countries have system like that. Elected council elects the mayor.

But now, you know, from the viewpoint of democracy, this system is not less democratic than direct election at all. And this system works in many European countries. Let me repeat again. But now what we are working on is that there was one longstanding issue, opposition demanding direct elections of Tbilisi city mayor. So what is the difference? I mean, Tbilisi is the center of Georgian political life. And Tbilisi being a center is the most critical constituency in Georgia.

So opposition feels that they have higher chances to win elections in Tbilisi if it is direct elections of mayor, but not the system which is now. I mean, council and then mayor. So again, it is not a matter of being democratic or not because this system is exactly as democratic as the other one. But it is a matter of political reasonability, whether we should do or not.

And basically, we said that we agree with that because if opposition wants to play by rules, which is more favorable for the opposition, we take the challenge. And that is part of the offer, which I said that we are designing steps how we can make opposition stronger and how we can increase opposition's participation in the political life, increase their strengths and increase their responsibility.

So we basically agreed to play by their rules. And we agreed to have direct election of city mayor in Tbilisi. But it does not mean that the system, which is in other cities, is bad or is undemocratic. It is democratic. And it is a matter of political reasonability. And because of political reasonability, because having more engagement of opposition into political life, we made a political decision to agree to change the system in Tbilisi. But it does not mean that it obliges us to change system in other cities as well.

So it is a process and it is a matter of political reasonability. And I cannot exclude and I do not exclude that after having direct elections in Tbilisi, at certain point, we may come – we may change the system and move to the same model in other cities as well. But the fact that we will do or we will not do it at this point doesn't mean that that other system is not democratic. No. I mean, both systems are equally democratic. And it is a matter of political reasonability.

We accept that challenge in Tbilisi because if opposition wins direct elections in Tbilisi, that will, I mean, significantly change the political landscape in the country because Tbilisi is 35 percent of population. Tbilisi is, I mean, almost 80 percent of GDP and financial flows. I mean, Tbilisi is the political center, so directly elected mayor of Tbilisi is a very powerful man in the country.

So if opposition wins that, they will have a very, very powerful position in the country. And, I mean, we took that challenge. But again, it is a matter of political reasonability. Which model will be accepted by majority of political parties, I cannot say right now because there are ongoing consultations back in that group. So we will see. We will see what happens there.

MR. KUCHINS: Okay. We have time for one more question. We will move back over to the left side here, the woman in the back in the pink, please. Thanks.

Q: Thank you. Susan Allen Nan at George Mason University. I wanted to ask if you could connect your emphasis on dialogue and your emphasis on security. And is there room for a variety of multi-track sorts of dialogues engaging the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians, even while the Russian troops are still present?

MR. BAKRADZE: Well, I mean, we see the development of this process as a kind of two-track movement. One is related to Russia and second is related directly to Abkhaz and South Ossetians. So I think that both tracks should move simultaneously. But, of course, I mean, let's be realistic. I mean, until and unless Russia starts implementation of ceasefire agreement, Russia starts demilitarization of these territories and there is elementary conditions of choice for the people living there, because what happens right now in both territories, basically, it is one big military camp, especially in South Ossetia. It is heavily depopulated area, which is converted into one big military camp.

So, I mean, one cannot speak about freedom of choice for a local population in these conditions and especially in the conditions when ethnic cleansing was conducted and majority of population had been forced to leave their home. So there should be general framework and security framework, which would allow people to express their free opinion. Otherwise, in the heavy military presence, illegal presence and in the realm of ethnic cleansing, you know, this freedom of choice doesn't exist.

So what should happen? Again, the first step should be, I mean, the beginning of implementation of a ceasefire agreement, gradual withdrawal of Russian troops, introduction of international observers on occupied territories and beginning of negotiations. And that all creates a much better pretext, which makes other track realistic, which is track of direct communication with Abkhazia and Ossetia.

I mean, we are working with them now. But let's be realistic. And I mean, let's not be naïve that at this point, this track cannot generate any result. We just have to keep these relations for the better future. And through these relations now, we are keeping certain ground for the better future. But until and unless this first issue, Russian issue is addressed, you know, this second track cannot generate any result. But we are working again and now government is preparing a special strategy on communicating with Abkhazia and Ossetia. Government is working on that. They asked our friends to be involved – international friends to be involved in that process as well.

So I expect that by the end of year, we will have a comprehensive strategy of communication with people remaining in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. So that strategy will be in place. We are also working, especially with our European friends, on some confidence-building measures, so that all happens. But in order for that to bring to positive results, we need to address Russia because otherwise, it would be not noticing elephant in the room.

MR. KUCHINS: Mr. Bakradze, on behalf of CSIS and all of our guests here in the audience, let me express my thanks to you today for opening the dialogue with us. And I think also everybody in Washington is grateful for the lovely Georgian weather, which you have brought here to us this week. We wish you success in the rest of your meetings here in Washington and good safe travels back to Tbilisi and success in your work there. And we look forward to continuing the dialogue here again sometime soon when you come back to visit. Thank you.

MR. BAKRADZE: Okay. Thank you very much. It was a pleasure. (Applause.)

(END)