

AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE ON GEORGIA

SPEAKER:

NINO BURJANADZE - *Leader of the Democratic Movement - United Georgia and Former Speaker of the Georgian Parliament*

**REMARKS OF
NINO BURJANADZE**

Nino Burjanadze opened her remarks by providing a historical perspective on the political developments in Georgia. She noted that in 2003, the Georgian political opposition achieved success in its ouster of President Eduard Shevardnadze, due to the unified nature of those who opposed his rule. Together, they vowed to fight for the true interests of the Georgian people and to promote economic development throughout the country. It was clear to the political leadership that democracy is the only way to develop the country. The Rose Revolution demonstrated that Western support and values are deeply valued by Georgians as a vital element in the process of creating a prosperous democratic society.

According to Ms. Burjanadze, early in the administration of President Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia was headed in the right direction. The government had taken serious steps to combat corruption, reform law enforcement, and modernize the military. In addition, the leadership took steps aimed at reforming Georgia's institutions so that they more closely resembled those in the West. During most of Saakashvili's first term, Georgia's political leaders were optimistic about the democratic trends that were beginning to solidify in the country. However, Burjanadze argued that soon after the elation of Shevardnadze's removal had worn off, President Saakashvili began making crucial mistakes, which ultimately hindered further development of the country. Most damaging, the decision-making process at the highest levels of government became nearly opaque and power was manipulated and concentrated in the hands of the President. Burjanadze claims that Saakashvili's actions to remove the constitutional checks put in place to ensure equal power between the three branches of government have had a damaging effect on Georgian democracy. Further, during Saakashvili's presidency, Georgia's political institutions, especially the Parliament and the Supreme Court, have been significantly weakened and the media more closely regulated. According to Burjanadze, November 2007 marked a turning point for many Georgians. Government officials repeatedly thwarted opposition demonstrations and independent media gradually ceased to exist.

Some hoped that the 2008 elections would provide a chance to put Georgia back on the right track. The President was reelected, and there was renewed optimism that a new system

of checks-and-balances would be put in place. However, the Constitutional amendments passed in April 2008 squandered any such hopes. The Parliament's influence in the political process was further diminished and its ability to function as a counterweight to the President seriously undermined. For these reasons, Ms. Burjanadze felt it necessary to resign from her position as Speaker of Parliament. Soon thereafter, Burjanadze established the Foundation of Democratic Development, an organization with the goal of strengthening civil society, creating a balanced political party, and winning a share in the Parliament.

The August 2008 War forced the country to acknowledge a harsh, new security reality. Burjanadze places significant blame on Saakashvili for allowing his government to be "baited" by Russian actions, and ultimately engaging its northern neighbor in a war destined for failure. In five days last August, Georgia lost 20% of its total territory, mainly in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. She noted that it is likely that Georgia's foreign political orientation was also a major factor in the war. The Georgian population has very strong pro-Western feelings and has exhibited increasingly hostile feelings toward Russia. For its part, Russia has actively tried to prevent Georgia from becoming a member of NATO, even though it is the express wish of the Georgian population. Burjanadze highlighted that the August War significantly set back Georgian progress on toward NATO membership because it demonstrated the security risk member states would be forced to absorb. In addition, several NATO countries have voiced concern about the decision-making process in Georgia and its ability to be provoked by Russian actions.

Burjanadze lambasted Russia's actions of 2008 and called for full compliance with the Medvedev-Sarkozy ceasefire that ended the war— Russia has yet to abide by the major principles outlined in the agreement. Furthermore, she noted that the subsequent recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence only elevated the regional instability already experienced by both Russia and Georgia. Burjanadze stressed that Georgia will never accept the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the grounds that these republics have always been a part of Georgia. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Georgians must be allowed to return to their homes. She argued that the only possible way to resolve the problem is to build civilized connections with communities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By furthering the economic and political condition of Georgia, the government can make the country appear more attractive to the separatist regions. This process, however, will take a long time.

Finally, Burjanadze said that Russia's call to remove President Saakashvili is highly unorthodox and disrespectful. Saakashvili was elected by the people of Georgia and no other state is allowed to decide who should be the President of the country. Moreover, she said that there were signs Russia actually helped Saakashvili hold his post while criticizing him.

During the August war, Georgian society was united around its President, but this unity did not last long. Burjanadze described her decision to send a list of 43 questions about the war to the President and her frustration with the administration's failure to respond. In her letter, Burjanadze proposed the following steps: strengthening political institutions, opening dialogue between opposition parties and the government, freeing the media, implementing constitutional reforms, strengthening and uniting the society, and restructuring the judiciary. Burjanadze alleges that since her letter was sent, Saakashvili strengthen control over the media and the judiciary and has begun using the Ministry of Internal Affairs as political police. As a

result, hundreds of thousands of people participated in opposition rallies. These people have been forced to choose between fighting for democracy and maintaining the stability of the government.

Burjanadze noted that the opposition has chosen to be peaceful and responsible, even as the government uses all available methods to disrupt protests. She described encounters with the government supported “private militia” and how it detains opposition protestors and accuses them of spying for Russia.

Concluding her remarks, Burjanadze called for more international support and attention to the Georgian opposition movement and its aim to protect democracy in Georgia.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS SESSION

Andrew Kuchins of CSIS commented on Burjanadze’s remarks, explaining that it was his belief that the August war in Georgia represented a major U.S. policy failure and diminished the credibility of U.S. security commitments around the world. He asked Burjanadze what advice she would give to the Obama administration on how to address Georgia and Russia. Ms. Burjanadze responded that the U.S. has warned the Georgian government about possible provocations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Prior to the war, Dr. Rice sent a clear message to Georgia to be patient. No one wanted to see a new Cold War between the U.S. and Russia. Burjanadze added that the decision to involve Russia in a dialogue with the U.S., EU and NATO is important and right. She praised the strong statement of support President Obama made about Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity at the Moscow Summit. She then noted Russian President Dmitry Medvedev’s less than encouraging reaction-- a trip to South Ossetia.

She expressed her desire that the international community should continue to provide financial support to Georgia but only on a conditional basis. This will help to ensure that funding reaches the people and NGO’s it is meant for and not intercepted by the government. Current relations between the West and Georgia are based on visibility and respect for publicly elected government. Burjanadze believes that there currently is a great need for the West to push democratic reforms in the country. Burjanadze added that she hoped that, while in Georgia, Vice President Biden will stress this message and have a separate meeting with opposition leaders.

The second question pertained to political freedoms in Georgia. Why is it that Georgian opposition leaders have vast freedoms, yet they are widely portrayed as oppressed?

Burjanadze began by stating that the President of Georgia had an ambition for Georgia to become democratic, but in reality, has made it less free. According to the international freedom ranks, Georgia moved from 33rd place in 2003 to 120th in 2009. She explained that there are no real talk shows on Georgian TV—that there is no real debate. The national channels are under full control of the government, and are headed by former government leaders, loyal to Saakashvili.

Commenting on the opposition rallies, Burjanadze explained that the participants did not engage in any illegal actions during the protests. Moreover, she noted how the government supported special forces were shouting “Misha” [Saakashvili] when the police began to beat protestors. She criticized the police for using plastic bullets during protest even though they are

forbidden by Georgian law. As a result, two people were blinded. Numerous opposition calls for a release of police videotapes from the protests received no response from the authorities. She also explained that the actions taken by Saakashvili to strip her of a security escort were highly illegal. Last, Burjanadze recounted the shock she felt when she discovered that there was a monetary reward offered to injure her.

Commenting on the allegations that she was pro-Russian, Burjanadze challenged the government to find something that she had been given by Russia. She said that Saakashvili himself had mentioned that she had received money from the Russian government and that she felt it necessary to sue him for that action. There has been no follow-up from the court about her case, and no hearing date has been set. Burjanadze pledged to send an appeal to the Strasbourg court.

On foreign policy issues, Burjanadze explained that Russia will not tolerate any independent, pro-Western government near its borders. When the war broke out, Burjanadze called for the evacuation of women, children, and elderly people. She said Georgia should wait until Russia started to occupy the country and then ask the international community for help. Unfortunately, the Georgian government acted differently, and stoked tensions until a massive military operation was inevitable. The South Ossetia conflict had been imminent for a decade, but Saakashvili government was unable to prevent the conflict.

The last question touched on the development of the Georgian armed forces and international military support to Georgia. Burjanadze stated that Georgia needs to continue to receive support, and to train armed forces according to NATO standards. In terms of territorial integrity, she thinks Georgia should build bridges and connections with Abkhazia and South Ossetia to revamp ties among Georgian communities. She noted that there are more commonalities between Georgians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians than differences.

Burjanadze, concluding, expressed hope that international assistance will be continued and that the U.S. will remain as committed to strengthening the Georgian government as it was in the past.