



Georgia's Path to Democracy and Transatlantic Integration

Featuring:

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Tuesday, March 20, 2007
1:00 P.M. - 2:30 P.M.
Lower Level, Conference Room B1B
CSIS, 1800 K Street N.W.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

It is indeed my pleasure to address this distinguished gathering and I extend my sincere gratitude to the Center for Strategic and International Studies for providing me this special opportunity to discuss contemporary developments in Georgia and its place in global politics.

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The end of the 20th century was the period of vibrant political changes; a time of hope for millions when new independent countries emerged. These drastic changes gave birth to new challenges and spurred new formulations of such global priorities as peace and stability, the spread of liberty and common values, active economic cooperation and the inclusion of energy in concepts of security.

In a modern globalized world, it is clear that instability in one part of the globe can have effects far beyond the immediate region. It is also clear that the best means of security is through the enlargement of common democratic space. Because of this truth, the international community should spare no effort to help the states in transition to become full-fledged democracies.

It is only democracy and democratic governance that guarantees the secure environment today. That is why the continuous international assistance is a decisive factor in order to support states in transition. That is why we believe that through supporting democracy and stability in the Caucasus region and in Georgia, the world democratic community contributes to the security and stability of all.

Being a transitional country located in a turbulent neighborhood, with young and still fragile democratic institutions, Georgia understands better than anyone else how important stability is for ensuring proper direction of country's development. Our key priority is to ensure the irreversibility of democratic processes in Georgia, to

build a strong democratic state which will be a reliable international partner. Our political leadership is working hard to follow the track of democratic reforms. Usually, such drastic reforms are very painful, and this has been true in Georgia. Building democracy in a country which has suffered from the decades of dictatorship is not an easy task. We are committed to work closely with international institutions and democratic states in our defense of shared values.

At present one of the main tasks for the Parliament of Georgia is the harmonization of our laws to meet international standards. But it should be emphasized that legal changes are not being adopted automatically – but are each scrutinized to ensure they benefit our citizens. Of course, Parliament has a decisive role in creating the legal basis for democratic reforms and overseeing proper implementation. In this regard the Parliament of Georgia is setting a standard of accountability and transparency.

It would like to underline that it is of crucial importance to strengthen the oversight functions of our parliament – especially now when the political opposition is not strong and three branches of government are run by members of the same political party. The state institutions are represented by the same political team. The Georgian people, through their votes and their support, gave us this opportunity and we understand that we have to be especially careful to avoid mistakes. According to the present rules of procedure, the opposition enjoys certain privileges such as setting the parliamentary agenda once a month and has representation in a special group established to exercise oversight the defence budget and its classified expenditures. Yet, we are prepared to do more to create better conditions and find new approaches to increase the involvement of the opposition in building our democracy.

Therefore, according to the initiative and active involvement of the the ruling party, a new format of cooperation - `Inter-Factional Group` has been established. The main goal of this group is to facilitate the possibility of reaching a consensus among the parliamentary factions thus providing the opposition with an additional tool for participating in the decision-making process.

However, despite all these achievements, much remains to be done. And success of our future development significantly depends on involvement and assistance of international actors.

As an example, let me mention such an important direction as the Rule of Law and Independent Judiciary, which Georgian government identified as the key priority for 2007. We have already started fundamental reforms in the judiciary. The Parliament of Georgia adopted constitutional amendments that limit the Presidential power to appoint judges. A completely new practice for the Georgian court system – trial by jury - was established and will start functioning in 2008. The government of Georgia is committed to continue these vital reforms to ensure the proper functioning and full independence of the judiciary. The laws adopted meet international standards and now our efforts are aimed at perfecting the implementation of these laws.

Once again, let me clarify that the Georgian society has already declared its solid will to become a full-fledged member of Euro-Atlantic institutions. These aspirations must not be subject to any kind of bargain or political manipulations. Georgia is devoted to its chosen path and will remain firm on our democratic journey to make our progress irreversible.

Sometimes we Georgians have to explain to some of our European partners why we aspire to NATO membership. Our NATO aspiration stems from our belief that common values call for common defense. We seek to join NATO not just for our security but because we believe we can contribute to NATO's security.

Georgia's integration in NATO has the support of Georgian society and the entire political spectrum. Membership in the Alliance is supported by more than 80% of the population. Just several days ago, the Parliament of Georgia adopted a document of `National Consensus` on NATO integration, jointly signed by all political parties – ruling and opposition. This document demonstrates that despite different approaches on many domestic issues, foreign policy and NATO integration is a matter of common vision for all Georgians.

The prospect of membership is a strong development incentive for the country, mobilizing society and in turn, mobilizing the government.

We don't want only to be a beneficiary of the positive outcomes that NATO membership may bring, but we are fully conscious and prepared to contribute our share to the international community. At this stage, Georgia is actively involved in international peace operations in Iraq and Kosovo. Today, after the United States and Great Britain, Georgia is a third country according to the number of its military contingent in Iraq and the government of Georgia has made its decision to increase the existing number (850 soldiers) up to two thousand (2000) militaries. In a near future Georgian troops will join the NATO mission in Afghanistan. The decision to increase our military presence in Iraq was in many ways conditioned by the desire to contribute to the process of democracy building and the necessity to establish stability in the region. Being a close neighbor to this unstable region, Georgia fully comprehends, (sometimes even better than some of our partners) that the failure of democracy in Iraq would inevitably entail dramatic consequences for its immediate neighborhood and far beyond. This decision also is a vivid confirmation that Georgia is committed to the long-term strategic partnership, willing to take risks and share the burdens of protecting common interests in the 21st century.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Undoubtedly, the main issue of contemporary global politics is energy. The political forecast is that the New Order in the 21st century `will be dominated by the war over resources`. It goes without saying that the country which manages to win the fight for the leading role in energy resources and distribution market may feel free to determine political developments and the rules of the game.

The global monopoly in energy is a very dangerous phenomenon; especially if the energy-monopolist is a power whose policy and the methods that it uses for its implementation can be entitled in every possible way but not as `democracy`. The monopoly that may result in artificial increase of gas and oil prices and such unjustified increase may damage the economy not only of developing countries, but also of the states with developed economies. Sad to say, but today free economy and free energy markets are facing a very serious problem – Russia.

To be clear from the very beginning - my intention is not to blame Russia for everything; I simply want to illustrate the roots of the problem, and explain why Russia is trying so hard to regain its influence in Georgia.

Being the Black Sea coastal state, Georgia is a natural link between Europe and Asia and serves as a corridor for the transportation and distribution of energy resources. The region of the South Caucasus has grown in its strategic importance in recent years with the construction of new pipelines from the energy-rich region of the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Europe benefits from Georgia's favorable location and the full realization of transit potential that provides much-needed diversity of supply. Georgia already plays a major strategic role in transit of Caspian oil and gas resources to Western markets and possesses all necessary infrastructure to greatly expand oil and natural gas transit from the Trans-Caspian and Central Asian resources to Europe.

Our role in diversification of energy supplies to Europe is one of the major reasons behind the external pressure Georgia experiences today. The issue of energy security has acquired particular relevance in the last months. As a result of Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Belarusian gas disputes mainly caused by Russia's political decision to increase the gas prices, the energy flows to many EU countries were disrupted. These actions were a warning to many in Europe. Russia is intentionally trying to eradicate any possibility of diversifying the energy routes for Europe. We all remember how fiercely Russia objected to the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines. We remember its attempts to reroute the pipelines through Russian territory. At this stage Russia's top target in securing its energy-monopoly is to halt the EU's high-priority Nabucco pipeline project for Caspian gas, which provides much-needed relief from overdependence on Russian gas.

Without diversifying energy supplies and their transportation routes, Europe and other countries of Eurasian region will largely depend on a single partner who has used energy as a political weapon. If Europe allows Russia to stop the Nabucco Project - this truly important energy-project aiming at transportation of Kazakh and Turkmen natural gas through Turkey to Europe – I would say that Europe itself will unintentionally contribute greatly to inevitable Gazprom's dominance.

In a democratic world, reliable and predictable economic relations are essential for prosperity and freedom. Unfortunately, recent developments demonstrate that economic tools can be used as means of pressure. Russian military and political authorities appear to believe that 19th century tactics of violent nationalism and blunt economic pressure will not work in the globalized world of the 21st century. As you may know, in 2006 Russian Federation imposed full-scale economic embargo against all Georgian goods, including agricultural products, wine, and mineral waters; closed all legitimate border crossing points; seized transport and postal communications; restricted movement of people; launched large scale state sponsored campaign against ethnic Georgians living in Russia and Russian citizens of Georgian origin, leading to massive violations of basic human rights, and widespread ethnic discrimination.

The real purpose of these sanctions was to impede Georgia's independent development and try to reassert Russian political and economic control over my country. Unfortunately, despite multiple clear calls from the international community, Russia still hasn't abolished this blockade. All Russia did, as a gesture of 'good will' - was to send its ambassador back to Georgia.

Dear friends, I would say that this step was just a face-saving act, nothing more.

Another vivid demonstration of Russia's imperial policy is the problem of uncontrolled and lawless territories in Georgia. The so called "frozen" conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, artificially maintained by Russia, represent the most serious impediment for the consolidation of democracy and economic development in Georgia. These are the territories where internationally recognized ethnic cleansing against local Georgian population took place and three hundred thousand ethnic Georgians had to flee from the places they and their families lived for generations.

One of the main impediments to the peaceful resolution of existing conflicts is the presence of Russian military forces in the conflict zones. In fact, these 'peacekeepers' serve as border guards, protecting illegal de-facto borders set by separatist regimes and safeguarding the *status quo*. It is critical to internationalize the peacekeeping forces and demonopolize the Russian mandate to lay the foundation for resolving these conflicts.

Recent events demonstrate the danger of the status quo. On March 12th, Russian military helicopters breached Georgia's air borders, bombed Upper Abkhazia (known as Kodori Valley) –part of Abkhazia controlled by Georgia. In addition, artillery shells were also fired at the same region. These provocations serve to one goal: Russia seeks to harm the international image of Georgia and portray it as an unstable and unpredictable country – and therefore, unsuitable for NATO membership. We cannot allow the Russians to succeed in their effort.

Georgia is fully prepared for the comprehensive peaceful settlement of both conflicts. The Georgian government has prepared peace plans and detailed road maps approved by the OSCE for the resolution of these conflicts. Let me highlight that these plans are strongly supported internationally and were approved at OSCE Ministerial in Ljubljana. Moreover, we are dedicated to guarantee rights of every single ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetian in every part of Georgia. As for the regions themselves, we are ready to grant them a broadest model of autonomy that compares favorably to any country in the world – far more autonomy, for example, that enjoyed by North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. In our vision, the Georgian central government would be responsible only for core functions of defense, border protection and foreign policy.

In upcoming month, the government of Georgia will present to international organizations such as OSCE, Council of Europe, EU and others new approaches flexible ideas and an updated road-map for conflict resolution in South Ossetia. This road-map will include the instruments for full reintegration of the local population into the Georgian society and state institutions, restitution of property rights, accommodation of cultural and educational needs, free mass-media in native language. It provides possibility to have freely and directly elected local self-governance.

We welcome the statement of US State department supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia and recognizing the illegitimacy of the elections held in Abkhazia on 4th of March 2007 by de-facto authorities. We also welcome the similar statements made by the EU member-states, Council of Europe, Baltic countries, Poland and other like-minded countries for their support and assistance. Let me remind you that it was only the Russian Federation that perceived these elections as being held in “normal and quiet” circumstances.

Dear friends, if we get rid of everybody who has different point of view or totally compel any oppositional idea, I believe this will be a `unique recipe` for making all elections really `quiet` everywhere - in every single part of the world.

We hope to see high-level engagement of the international community in the process of conflict management to make real progress in 2007. We all should understand that unsolved conflicts are not simply a problem for Georgia or the long-suffering people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They are our common problems that create huge obstacles on the way to democracy, protection of human rights and shared values.

Having mentioned Russia in a negative context, I may receive a question from you: what are the authentic reasons for Russia to keep these conflicts `frozen` and exercise pressure on Georgia in general? Naturally, there should be no doubt that any normal country should be interested in having stable, free and peaceful neighbors. However, the problem is that the Russians use instability as an effort to secure its own influence in the region. Georgia appears to be the last stand for Russians who bemoan the demise of the Soviet empire.

Russia seems to worry that Georgia will become a success story of democratic transformation, motivating other countries to select the way of democratic development and European integration. If successful, Georgian test

case can end the whole concept of a “near abroad” where Russia exercises unique influence and a formula - `As goes Georgia – so goes the neighborhood` is getting more and more alarming reality for Russian authorities.

Our country has always been loyal to maintenance of friendly relations with its immediate neighbors in the region as well as with countries of Central Asia. As a result, Georgia enjoys the trust of many neighboring states which deem our country as a territory where everybody, even those in conflict now, can run the direct dialogue without any intermediates. This worries some in Russia.

Also worrying to some in Russia, is our declared aspiration to become a NATO and EU member state. I make this statement while being absolutely confident that Russia is determined to keep our bilateral relations strained. As a key precondition for better relations and progress in restoration of territorial integrity, Russia demands a total `Neutrality` from Georgia. According to Russian understanding of `Neutrality`, Georgia has to give up our sovereign right to strive for NATO membership. We know what Russia means by “neutrality: we have very sad experience of trusting our northern neighbor exactly with regard to the neutrality for it was independent and `neutral` Georgia that was attacked and occupied by the Soviet Army in 1919.

Dear friends, believe me it would be a difficult task to understand why the Russian Federation is so afraid of NATO and other institutions such as EU as its neighbors. But it is the stable environment for democratic development with values that are totally incompatible with Russia’s contemporary realities that worries the Russian leadership. Those of you who read President Putin’s speech at the recent Security Conference in Munich will see what I mean.

We all know that Russia has its own vision for regional arrangement and is struggling to redefine itself in the world where its influence and power are considerably less than they used to be. But we have never asked for the isolation of Russia. On the contrary - I urge attending representatives of all democratic nations to make the Russian leadership understand that true democracy is the only and ultimate chance to earn respect in contemporary international relations.

A secure Caucasus and secure and free Georgia are not a threat to Russia, just the opposite - Security in the Caucasus to a large degree means stability in Russia.

A democratic and predictable Russia is not only in Georgia’s interests, it is in the interests of all of us.

Assistance to Russia in building a genuine democracy will be the best kind of assistance the international community could provide to Georgia.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, let me stress again that unfortunately the problems exist and we should not ignore them, right on the contrary, we should do our best, trying all possible ways, to find the relevant solutions for all of them. I believe that all of us are aware of the need to learn from each other and to share the best practices adopted in each of our countries.

Thank you very much for your attention,
..And I am open for your questions

