

# Georgian Foreign Policy

INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR IRAKLI ALASANIA

*On March 4, 2008 Georgia's Ambassador to the United Nations Irakli Alasania, met with YJIA Editors William Ko and Alexander Besant to discuss contemporary issues in Georgian foreign policy, as well as Georgia's agenda in the 20th NATO Summit in Bucharest, Romania.*

**What are Georgia's foreign policy objectives? How does your government intend to realize them?**

Our foreign policy objectives are very transparent. Georgia, being a small country, benefits most by having an honest and straightforward position on regional security issues. For us, the number one priority is the territorial integrity of Georgia and to get as much international support to implement meaningful change in the conflict zones of South Ossetia and Abkhazia—change that is oriented towards producing results. We have IDP (Internally Displaced Person) problems due to the ethnic cleansing that has occurred. The central priority for us is sustained peace and the international community's support in this process.

Of course, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and Euro-Atlantic integration is another priority. We joined this intensive dialogue, which is another step for Georgian integration into the alliance in 2006. Three weeks ago, together with Ukraine, we applied for the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for NATO. We are going through drastic changes in our military and security fields, steps which are required to meet NATO standards. What is also very important is that we are providing security for NATO in Afghanistan and the Balkans, and we are also part of the anti-terror coalition in Iraq—in fact, after the United States and the United Kingdom, Georgia ranks third in the highest percentage of troops committed to the efforts in Iraq. This clearly declares that Georgia intends to join the Euro-Atlantic community because we share their members' values.

Another priority is regional security. We are developing a joint partnership with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia. We are also working with Ukraine to synchronize our foreign and regional policies. We are part of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Lately, our relationship with Russia has been quite low. With the new mandate of our president, we are trying to re-engage in positive dialogue with the Russians. A few weeks ago, there was a meeting between our president and President Vladimir Putin. That is a start to square things out.

**Will the election of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev change the trajectory of Georgian-Russian relations?**

In general, I don't foresee any changes in Russian foreign or domestic policy after this election. I think they will remain the same as under President Putin. But I envision a change leading to re-engagement between Russia and Georgia, which is in the better interests for both countries. In terms of regional interests, it is also good to focus on things that can be really beneficial: stability in the Caucasus—especially in the North Caucasus, which is a ticking time bomb.

It is in nobody's interest to have instability in this region, so I think there are sufficient grounds for cooperation. Separately, I would highlight U.S.-Georgian relations, which is the role model for how a superpower and a small country can be strategic allies. I think we have reached a point where we can now call each other allies.

**Of what significance to Georgia are Ukraine's relations with: the international community, the international organizations in question, and regional actors?**

Ukraine is a huge regional player with a big economy and big potential to be a larger regional player than it is now. The success of Georgia and the success of the Ukraine are not only the success of these nations but also the success of all post-Soviet nations trying to break from the past. This is not just about Ukraine, but also about settling the last scores of the Cold War. After the Balkans, it is time to make post-Soviet states truly free and independent. This will serve as a role model for other post-Soviet states to follow. This is why there is so much animosity towards these Georgian and Ukrainian initiatives from certain political elites in Moscow.

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**The non-binding referendum of Georgia's accession to NATO took place on January 5th, 2008, the same day as the Presidential elections. Incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili, a proponent of NATO accession, won by a considerable margin of votes. Did the NATO platform secure Saakashvili's success? What were the other domestic policies debated between the candidates?**

Yes, it's true that NATO accession and Georgia's membership in the Euro-Atlantic community was on the ballot on January 5th. Yet, from the outset, let me note that Georgia's foreign policy is the one issue that has a broad consensus, both among Georgians and their politicians. That is why the turnout of that referendum was more than seventy percent. But I don't think it's the main reason why Saakashvili succeeded.

I think, overall, during his first tenure as Georgia's President, there were a number of things really improved within the country. I can also speak of his shortcomings as well, but let's start with the fundamental reasons why the electorate chose Saakashvili. First, he really curbed corruption, which was the main issue in 2003. The fact that the credentials of a well-known politician like Eduard Shevardnadze, a Soviet minister and one of the architects of German unification, was forced to leave peacefully because of corruption shows how this issue was eating the country alive. So the first steps Saakashvili made was to clean up the government agencies. He raised salaries, tested new officials applying for jobs, and so on. And it was all done in an incredibly short period of time – one year.

The other thing that was important in the electoral campaign, and is a central issue to Georgians, is the territorial integrity of Georgia. Saakashvili based his pre-election strategy on this issue. Since 1993, the issue of territorial integrity has been a major problem in Georgian society and Saakashvili recently declared that his presidency is dedicated to the peaceful unification of Georgia. The other issue was that the opposition coalition was simply not acceptable for the majority of the population. Yes, members of the opposition were well-known to the public and some of their actions were appreciated, but there was nobody who was as young and charismatic as Saakashvili. At the same time, from the perspective of the opposition, Saakashvili, in 2003, enjoyed over ninety percent of the popular vote. Since then, due to the often painful reforms in the transition to a market economy, many felt that this change did not produce results fast enough. That is why popular support decreased to fifty-two percent. In Western Europe, fifty-two to fifty-three percent is normal but in Georgia, a forty percent decrease was really surprising for Saakashvili himself.

I think I would say that the coming parliamentary elections will prove to be very important. This is where we will really be tested and need to show the world that Georgia is really on the right track to democracy. This is why the OSCE's (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) criticism of the government's recent handling of elections was greatly appreciated. The Georgian government invited the OSCE to come to Georgia to discuss electoral improvement. The other thing is that there are bilateral talks with the opposition to have the constitutional amendments they were asking for. Nobody is happy with what happened in November. The President made it clear that it was not what he intended, but because he felt the threat from Russia was so great, it seemed as the only way out of the situation.

**NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, in a speech at Tbilisi State University on October 4, 2007, stated that the issues pertaining to the "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and its Partner countries in the Caucasus" should be resolved "with the OSCE and the UN, and not with NATO." He further stated that the "Alliance does not seek stronger involvement" and that the "Georgian Government has made a number of concrete proposals to build confidence." What are these proposals?**

Yes, it is true that the conflicts in the Caucasus are discussed under the OSCE and UN forums. We don't see NATO as an instrument for the resolution of this conflict. We see NATO as a security arrangement for Georgia to develop stably. Under the UN, we launched a few initiatives, one of which was the comprehensive review of the settlement process, fourteen years after the end of the (Georgian-Abkhazian) conflict. But what we really want is to be able to assess: where do we stand? Why has this peace process never produced any results? Why was the majority of the population unable to return home after the ethnic cleansing? What are the sources of these problems—is it the peace process? Or is it the actual Russian-led peace operations on the ground? We are looking forward to the results of this assessment, which will logically envisage how to improve this peace process.

The other thing is that we are really changing our approach to the society within the conflict zone. This is a war-torn society. The majority within the society was ethnically cleansed—and the majority of them were Georgians, as well as many other nationalities. We do think that the Georgian approach beforehand was not right. Isolating the societies in these parts of Georgia is not good because we are losing touch with them. We have a chance to develop with Europe and they need that chance as well. Keep in mind, however, that we cannot give the illusion that the separatist regime has legitimacy. Rather,

by working directly with the populace, we are showing that the Georgian government cares, and that the international community cares for them as well. This will bring confidence and trust. And then we can carry on with the peace process.

### **Can Kosovo's independence affect the resolution process or jeopardize Georgia's territorial integrity?**

It made negotiations with the separatist regime quite difficult this past year. They were told that if Kosovo declared independence with unilateral

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**ON ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA: "WE HAVE BEEN LIVING TOGETHER SINCE ANCIENT TIMES—AND WE PLAN TO KEEP IT THAT WAY"**

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recognition, they would have a chance to acquire independence as well. Of course, we should keep in mind that the cases of Kosovo and Abkhazia are completely different. One fact alone is more than sufficient to illustrate these differences: more than sixty-five percent of the Georgian population was ethnically cleansed by the

separatist regime, and they are not allowing them to go back. Just mentioning this fact is enough for international lawyers and experts to understand how different things are from Kosovo.

At the same time, it was very difficult because Russia maintained this calculated policy of ambiguity regarding the independence movements of Kosovo and within Georgia. This gave the separatist regimes additional illusions about their chances for independence and acceptance within the international community. Now that it is all said and done, the realization within the separatist regimes is that their independence will not be recognized because of the huge humanitarian catastrophe.

### **To what extent are the movements in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia interrelated?**

They are very much related as they were inspired by the same power – the Russian political and military elites of the late 1980s and early 1990s. So there are similarities on how these movements were encouraged. But there are also some differences. In Abkhazia, there was systematic and ethnic cleansing performed against the pre-dominant Georgian population in 1993. This region is mainly depopulated now. While in Tskhinvali, we have refugees, but we still have communities living together: Georgians and Ossetians who are trading together and finding common ground, while such is not the case in Abkhazia. Our policy of a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Abkhazia

envisages such people-to-people contact—getting people together, doing business and commerce, and so on. It is about possible coexistence without shooting each other. These are the differences. These are two beautiful parts of Georgia where we have been living together since ancient times—and we plan to keep it that way.

**Would Georgia's successful entry into NATO render it the only country in the Caucasus with membership or can we expect its neighbors to follow suit?**

At this point we are not only talking about Georgia but the Ukraine as well, which is another Black Sea country. With regards to the Caucasus, I know that Armenia and Azerbaijan are also actively involved in the Partnership for Peace with NATO. They are developing their relationship and are well on their way in this cooperation. We should assume that this process deepens cooperation within the Alliance, as well as between two Caucasian republics. What is helping a lot is that Georgia and Azerbaijan are involved in major energy projects in the Caucasus, linking Central Asian energy resources to Europe. We would like to see Armenia join in on this. We have gas and oil pipelines, railroad connections, and we hope that Armenia's participation in these projects will help them while aiding in regional stability.

**But don't bilateral Armenian-Azerbaijani relations have any effect on this process?**

Yes, it does, of course. I think there is an increased understanding within Armenian society that isolation from these projects is detrimental for everyone. Only integration and development can bring stability. Hopefully the talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan will bring results in the future.

**How would Georgia's NATO membership affect its relationship with Iran?**

We are enjoying very good relations with Iran. Iran is our historic neighbor for centuries, if not millennia. We have a common history. Even though we have different religious histories, we have a close culture in certain respects. Joining NATO does not mean that the relationship should worsen because we will manage the relationship in a way that will not be threatening. Moreover, NATO is already in the Caucasus in Turkey. Thus, I don't see why this would pose a problem.

**How does Georgia's NATO candidacy differ from the aspiring members in the Balkans, such as Albania and Macedonia?**

They are in the more advanced phases of NATO membership. While we are aspiring to get acceptance into the MAP, they are already there waiting for the invitation to join the process. Every nation has its own unique process, but I think that the major trends are quite similar. They understand that joining the alliance is performance based. So we really want to work hard with the transformation of Georgia's institutions, the judiciary, law enforcement, security, and defence. So far, all the evaluations we have been getting from international experts and from NATO have been very positive.

**Are Saakashvili's chances of political success in Georgia inherently tied to the outcome of MAP?**

Mr. Saakashvili campaigned hard on NATO enlargement. There are various factors we should keep in mind. It is up to the allies when they will extend another stage of enlargement incorporating Georgia. So no matter how things go in Bucharest, we should not be discouraged. We should continue on the path that Saakashvili has envisaged and, as I mentioned, more than 70% of the population aspires for the same. Yes, the rhetoric was high during the re-election campaign, and the President plans to follow-up on that, naturally.

**So the outcome of the 20th NATO Summit in Bucharest will have no immediate bearing on Georgian strategic initiatives with the West?**

The value of this integration is the process itself because within this process we are making our institutions more sustainable, more workable, and stronger. Whether it's the Bucharest Summit or any other summit, it really doesn't matter. Of course, the expectations are high now, as recent evaluations provide sufficient grounds to believe that Georgia should be invited into the MAP. Nevertheless, if it is postponed, it will not change our policies at all. ■