

TRANSCRIPT
(edited for clarity)

Current Developments in the Foreign Policy of Georgia

featuring Tedo Japaridze

online event held on 16 September 2022

MODERATOR (Fariz Ismailzade):

Welcome everyone and let me introduce our keynote speaker today. For the past two years, we have had a lot of webinars and online sessions. But now people are back to their daily routine, and somehow webinars are again becoming exciting as something we have missed from the pandemic period.

That's why today we have utilized the opportunity of online technologies and decided to connect with someone who is extremely experienced in regional politics, but physically not in Baku. We decided to organize online sessions to benefit from his rich experience. It is my great honor to introduce Ambassador Tedo Japaridze. As many of the participants know, Ambassador Japaridze has been in a number of very high-ranking positions in foreign policy-related positions in Georgia. Primarily I would like to mention him being an ambassador in Washington, DC for many years, representing independent Georgia in the United States in the early and difficult years of the country's independence. Then he was National Security Adviser and chairman of the National Security Council of Georgia. He was a member of parliament and Foreign Relations Committee chairman in Parliament, and most notably, he has also been Minister of Foreign Affairs. Incidentally, for a brief period, he also led ADA's Energy Security Center.

Ambassador Japaridze is also a friend of Azerbaijan, a person who always understands the complexities of our region, and we hope that he will also find time to visit ADA University again in the future.

Please allow me to also introduce the topic: we in Azerbaijan consider Georgia as our strategic ally and partner. And sometimes, it's very difficult to understand the foreign

policy priorities of Georgia—frequent change of governments, prime ministers, different ministers. During the tenure of President Mikheil Saakashvili, there was a very vocal focus on pro-Western orientation. After that, there was not enough clarity on whether Georgia is pro-Western or not. Nowadays, this complexity has become more tangible in terms of how Tbilisi deals with Brussels. Ambassador Tedo Japaridze is the best person to explain to us where Georgia is heading today in terms of its foreign policy orientation, and what is the impact of the Karabakh and Ukrainian conflicts in Georgia’s foreign policy trajectory.

Ambassador Tedo Japaridze, the floor is yours.

JAPARIDZE:

Thank you very much for this kind introduction and thank you for the invitation. I’m delighted to be back at ADA, which in recent years consolidated its potential and resources to become an outstanding educational and research institution of global significance. Before the session I just talked to my ADA friends and learned that students from 40 countries are now enrolled in ADA, studying a range of specializations in the context of a transforming world order. So, thank you very much, again to ADA, many thanks to ADA’s leadership, distinguished Rector Hafiz Pashayev and to you, Fariz Ismailzade, for inviting me for this conversation.

Let us call it a conversation rather than a lecture, which I hope would be interesting and interactive. What’s going on in Georgia and how is it linked to what is happening in Azerbaijan?

I would say that Georgia’s stability and security is important for Azerbaijan and the broader regional landscape. In our region of small states, there is interdependence of sovereignty, stability, security, and economic prosperity. In a global context, our region is an integrated sub-system and in understanding one of us—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—one needs to understand all of us.

One personal disclaimer, before I proceed in my conversation: whatever I’m going to say would be purely my personal opinions, evaluations, and judgments of somebody who looks at the current political landscape of Georgia through my personal lenses. I spent more than 30 years in Georgian politics as an insider and in different capacities, which you, Fariz, kindly reminded me of, but I am not close to the current Government of Georgia and so, I do not have privileged access to their policy development.

To address the question at hand: our two countries are strategic partners. That’s obvious! I’d like to say also—and I hope we all agree—that unfortunately Georgia is not a boring country; it is internally dynamic with vibrant political competition, although we have achieved a healthy sense of consensus in

key policy directions, including our partnership with Azerbaijan. Those who observe Georgia's political life acknowledge there is a strong element of personalized politics, feuds and quarrels. The country is strongly committed to its Western trajectory, but agrees in little else: for example, President Saakashvili was a polarizing figure despite being emblematically pro-Western, however, Georgia's journey westward started by Eduard Shevardnadze who was the first Georgian official who knocked at the doors of Western institutions. So, where is a healthy element in this balance between agreeing on fundamental principles and having deep political divides, an uneasy balance required in foreign policy?

Georgia and Azerbaijan have been blessed and doomed to be located on the default line of global geopolitical tectonic plates and that, I would say eternal archetype was identified and solidified by Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze. And that's why I talked above about interconnectedness of Georgian and Azerbaijan security paradigms. Our countries have a traumatic collective and institutional memory of tackling security and foreign policy challenges. Georgia indeed experienced Russia's direct military aggressions, hybrid warfare attacks, humanitarian crisis, and attempts to create different terrorist enclaves and transit corridors for so-called "public bads." We all know and have talked about that many times, Fariz.

Georgia still has to live with an ongoing military occupation. As we speak, Russian tanks are posted only 40 kilometers away from my house. Because of this dire legacy, Georgia's collective and institutional memory is scarred by a perpetual fear of Russia that today, in the light of war in Ukraine, emerges as increasingly justified. However, we need to keep in mind that Georgia cannot affect its own geography and our foreign policy needs to reflect this fact. That kind of consensus is difficult to establish, particularly in a world where people find it increasingly harder to agree on what constitutes "facts" and, therefore, realism.

So, if you ask me about the biggest challenges for Georgia's foreign policy projection, its content, its agenda, I would say it is the increasing difficulty to formulate political consensus on key strategic priorities, including issues that for decades we held to be "self-evident."

Georgia's political class—the Government, the opposition, and civil society appear to agree that NATO and EU membership is desirable. However, how one moves from a proclamation to fulfilling the conditions the project of Euro-Atlantic integration is associated with is quite another story. The divergence between theory and practice is not a solely Georgian marvel. What is particular in the Georgian case is a "winner takes all" political culture, where the ambition to dominate the political landscape can defy even what we call "common sense." Countries greater than Georgia deal with similar issues, of course. The problem is that decisions in Georgia have regional

implications and the smaller the country you are the greater is the need for policy consensus. We cannot afford mistakes.

Daily squabbles are causing Georgia to lose its political energy and resources. More than that, we are loading a substantial debate with emotional significance that could undermine our foreign policy objectives. Overall, Georgians need to remember that our policy interacts with those of the countries in the region and we should not be as self-absorbed. To our partners, such as Turkey and Azerbaijan, our squabbles appear amateurish and there is little appetite for understanding, particularly in challenging circumstances. So, I wish Georgia could be politically as “boring” Estonia when it comes to formulating a fundamental foreign policy consensus.

Recently, our prime minister visited Brussels. The message from Brussels is that Georgia should be committed to reforms; our Prime Minister’s response was pragmatic enough, in that he committed to building bridges within Georgia’s political system. I think one of the problems with reforms is that successive governments keep pointing towards the end objective of EU and NATO membership rather than the process of reform as an end in-itself. Rather than “expectations management” and “the membership carrot,” we should be discussing the benefits of creating a democracy where rule of law increases our citizen’s confidence as well as that of foreign investors. That kind of a democracy would also be invaluable to our partners. And we need a consensus over this end-vision to build an effective foreign policy narrative.

MODERATOR:

Thank you, Ambassador Japaridze. This was very useful to understand the foreign policy thinking in Georgia, in Georgian society, as well as regarding Georgian policymakers.

Well, there are some questions, of course, coming from participants, but let me ask the first question as the moderator.

Azerbaijan—after the Karabakh conflict—proposed a 3+3 model for regional cooperation: Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan plus regional powers, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. What are exactly the problems that Georgia is experiencing with this 3+3 model? What is the attitude of Georgia to this? And, also, what is the attitude of Georgia towards the Zangezur corridor?

JAPARIDZE:

Again, as we talked just before we started our conversation, of course you know that the Second Karabakh War has drastically changed the regional landscape as well as the region’s perspective. And I think Georgian policymakers, analysts, and observers should promptly reevaluate what happened in the

region. Suffice to say that Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War created not only opportunities for Azerbaijan but for the entire region.

Regarding 3+3, Fariz, it is easy for me to just answer your question. Wherever format includes Russia—let alone in a position of power—makes Georgian policymakers to jerk. Russia is an occupier. The current government tries not to escalate these sentiments. But, the fact on the ground is that Russia occupies 20 or more percent of Georgian territory. Why not rethink of the 3&3 format as a series of bilateral consultations: given that Georgia is not a rule-maker—and can't be in a room with Russia—we are much more open to bilateral or trilateral consultations with the +3 than a negotiation with Russia. We are open to discuss on this, but we need to intensify this dialogue with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran before we have the confidence to commit.

QUESTION (Tural Abbasov):

Mr. Japaridze, thank you for the information and the lecture. My question is about the current situation. What do you expect from the duration and the consequences of the Ukraine war, for Europe, the post-Soviet countries, and especially our region, the South Caucasus, and Georgia in particular? Thank you.

QUESTION (Vitaliy Yarmolenko):

My name is Vitaliy Yarmolenko. I represent the National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine. Greeting from Ukraine. My question is about Georgia's approach, Georgia's attitude towards the current aggression—the current war. What may change Georgia's rather neutral attitude towards these Russian actions against Ukraine and its neutral position?

JAPARIDZE:

For obvious reasons Georgia cannot be neutral to whatever is going on in Ukraine, which is, historically, strategically, and politically, Georgia's strategic partner. I was in Ukraine in one of my previous capacities when we signed the Framework Treaty on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with Ukraine. So, Georgia cannot be neutral. However, I understand the context of your question. And that is why I mentioned that Georgian foreign policy statements need more clarity. What I know—and I do not know everything—Georgia is that we must continue to stand by Ukraine. There are already Georgian volunteers fighting with the Ukrainian Army. Georgia does its best to help Ukraine because we understand that whatever happens will affect our own future perspectives and perhaps our sovereignty and independence. In this regard, I'd like to reassure my friend from Ukraine that Georgia would not relinquish its commitment to countering Russian imperialism.

QUESTION (read by moderator):

Whether Georgia is thinking to increase economic cooperation with China. As well, the Middle Corridor is now becoming a very important project in Eurasia, with sanctions on Russia and sanctions on Iran, the trans-Caspian corridor, the Caucasus, and Central Asia in China are becoming very important. So, what would you say about these economic linkages to China?

JAPARIDZE:

China is very important actor of the global security and trade. Georgia cannot afford not to engage with China at all, which is also true for Europe and the United States.

I have been carefully watching China's engagement with the South Caucasus and specifically with Georgia and I would not say that the Chinese are just fully ready for that engagement. I remember the Chinese side had an intension to be involved, when Georgia was planning to build this deep-sea water port in Anaklia; a plan that was abandoned. Still, China remains dynamically engaged, although there seems to be less enthusiasm for the country's strategic role, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But, answering your questions, I would prefer more active engagement of Chinese companies in Georgia, but, as I understand, the Chinese are very cautious. They used to be cautious just before the aggression of Russia into Ukraine. I talked to some very high-level Chinese diplomats, who said that China supports and is very much interested to be politically engaged in the South Caucasus, specifically in Georgia. But they consider this part of the world as a Russian sphere of influence they do not want to infringe upon. Of course, Fariz, the Middle Corridor is very important. And in this regard, I always say we had to build this deep-sea water port in Anaklia; I have heard Georgian officials thinking of restarting the project but there is no practical step as yet and I am afraid we are losing momentum and letting down our partners, including Turkey and Azerbaijan. At the very least, I would expect from the Georgian government more frequent and deeper consultations with our regional partners.

MODERATOR:

Thank you very much. There are two more questions. But let me ask you a further question, in my capacity as moderator. Has there been a change of public opinion in Georgia regarding the European Union, considering the latest, let's say, negative response from Brussels on visas, on Georgia's EU membership application? Has public opinion been changed?

JAPARIDZE:

Certainly, all this has affected public opinion, but not as regards to the end-vision of membership. Most Georgians expected Georgia would be granted an EU candidate status but understand fully how and why we have failed expectations. There is this 12-point agreement or document put forward by the EU setting objectives which, as I said earlier, should be regarded as legitimate in their own right rather than merely “means to an end.” In any event, Georgia needs to move into action and substance rather than merely tick boxes. I think the government intends to just that.

QUESTION (read by moderator):

We have a question about multilateral diplomacy—multilateral cooperation—in the Black Sea region. You are one of the best persons to answer this, because you spent three or four years with the Black Sea Cooperation Organization’s think tank (ICBSS) in Athens. Where is this grand idea that existed before—about the wider Black Sea region, Black Sea cooperation. Where do you think it is heading?

JAPARIDZE:

I think that multilateral diplomacy has vanished. If we look at this framework and what we witness in the Black Sea area, Russian aggression in Ukraine precludes the possibility of an inclusive regional framework. Georgia and Russia also have dire problems. The majority of members within the format of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) are dealing with one conflict or another. I talked to my friends over there, and they said BSEC is still working: but how can you work on tighter economic cooperation while you face the prospect of war in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia? Let's hope that BSEC will be there to cement whatever comes after the war in Ukraine.

QUESTION (Aygün Hajiyeva):

I am sure Ambassador Tedo Japaridze was working very closely with the leading think tanks in his diplomatic career, especially, when he was the Ambassador of Georgia to the United States. And we recently established the Institute for Development and Diplomacy; and we have the vision to become the leading policy-oriented research hub in Azerbaijan—and not only in Azerbaijan, but also in our region. How do you evaluate the role of think tanks in foreign policy? So, what should think-thanks do nowadays in such difficult times, to influence somehow foreign policymakers?

JAPARIDZE:

Thank you for the very important question. Because this is very important for think tanks, old and new: they need to focus on policy and cooperation rather than merely criticizing foreign policy. Think tanks are there to lay the ground of alternative policies; no single personality can embody change: change requires research. In this regard, the existence of think tanks and institutes that produce different economic or political options is invaluable.

My humble advice would be: it's not about only your institute. It is not time to sit in different think tanks and create different food-for-thought papers. This is the time for practical ideas. When we speak about global affairs, creating a new world order, which includes strategy, foreign policy, economic and commercial dimensions— there is a need for innovation and creativity. I heard about ADA's new institute for the first time today. I would love to assist you in connecting with global debates and global institutions. One idea: why not create a group of wise people that can consist of retired ambassadors and government officials to discuss several strategic issues. We need to balance experience with audacity, if we want to “think the unthinkable.”