

Georgian Politics and the Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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First, what is going on right now in Georgia after five years of independence? It is generally recognized by experts from all the organizations working with us and the whole international community that things are improving in Georgia. I mean by this, first, the settling of the criminal situation, which was terrible only two years ago. It was just terrible—I'm not afraid to express this. This was the result of the collapse and the situation in the whole of the former Soviet Union. We settled it, and I am very proud of this, because this is the background and basis for everything, for all changes, for all positive changes and normal conditions of life for people. It gave us the opportunity to think about the future in terms of real democracy, in terms of using the deepest values that we have and sharing these values with the rest of the world.

Now what about the main subject, the settling of the conflicts on the territory of Georgia? Georgia's territorial integrity is recognized by the whole world community, by all organizations that are able to express themselves. We have two conflicts, in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. I think that all of you know where these are on a map of Georgia.

What are the differences between these two conflicts, what are the similarities, and what are the difficulties that we are encountering with them now? The Ossetian conflict is much older than the Abkhazian, in terms of the bloody stage of the conflict. I do not want to say that it is easier to settle than the other, but it seems that it can be settled in a shorter period of time for many reasons. Keith Fitzgerald is one of a number of people involved in a project working on this issue. They have held brainstorming sessions for us and the Ossetians in Oslo. The first session was in January, which I did not attend, and the second was in May. My personal opinion is that the informal nature of the sessions gave us the chance to be more sincere and to have a much more positive attitude because the environment enabled us to do this, even though all of us were decision makers on our own stages. The first result, which I appreciate very much, is that we were able to estab-

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lish human contacts between us, because the main deficit we have had is the absence of direct human contacts. Such contacts are very useful. I am not talking as a psychologist—I am saying this because all of us are human beings. It does not matter what we are doing—everything depends on our attitude and our will. The main thing in conflicts is the mistrust between people—not groups of people, but between people. The sessions were a great opportunity for us to show each other that we have no reasons to mistrust each other, and that we are human beings who have positive attitudes. Even though we had people who did not have such positive attitudes, the whole environment, the whole situation, and the strategy of brainstorming gave us the opportunity to be more useful in this process.

I hope that this group will continue with the project, and perhaps they will pay more attention to the Abkhazian problem as well. We have had some results that are very useful, in my opinion. I do not want to connect them directly to this brainstorming, but they are part of it because this is only one of the kinds of activities that we have in settling this conflict. This is one of the activities that is informal, but that supports a lot of formal processes. I mean political processes, the negotiation process, and the work of expert groups on political and economic issues. As you know, we have a group of people working on four sides on economic issues. This is the joint control commission that meets every three months, dealing with the economic revival of this region, which is suffering a lot, and with things that might help settle problems.

There is another kind of activity, which is the political settlement process, the negotiation process. A couple of months ago, we signed a memorandum of five sides (Georgia, South Ossetia, the North Ossetian Republic in the Russian Federation, the Russian Federation itself, and the OSCE, which acts as an observer-facilitator, because it has a mandate to be involved in the Ossetian conflict on a political level). Then we had this brainstorming session in May, and at the initiative of Mr. Chibirov, the chairman of the South Ossetian parliament, we set up a meeting between Mr. Shevardnadze and Mr. Chibirov in Vladikavkaz. We had the feeling that this was a very important meeting, and it concluded with a memorandum on concrete issues, expressing all the attitudes toward settling this problem, talks relating to status questions, and on concrete steps for creating special expert groups that will deal with the different issues we have between us.

Let me stop this story about South Ossetia right now in order to put together what I want to express about Abkhazia as well. What stage are we at in the Abkhazian conflict? We have two kind of activities. One is the effort toward a political settlement, working on protocol issues. In my opinion this is getting worse, but this is nevertheless an activity. There is another activity, the peacekeeping activity at the border. Previously, we had a lot of activities, for which I have papers where you can look for the dates and details—I do not want to present these to you right now, but if someone is curious about steps we took under the UN umbrella, they can take a look. One year and a half ago, all sides decided to make the Russian side more active in facilitating this process. The UN went more into the background, and became less active. This was the decision of all sides for many reasons. It is very clear that if Russia wants to settle this conflict, it can do

this. So we trusted this and we believed it would be the best decision to give them a greater role in the settling of this problem. The decision was to bring in peacekeepers. Mostly, they are Russians even though they are called CIS country forces, and there are some people from the UN who are observers of this process.

What we have right now, at this stage, a couple of months ago, after the memorandum with the South Ossetians, is that work on the Abkhazian political protocol collapsed because of the Abkhazian side. This work stopped. What was the main issue? From our side, the main point of the protocol was that we are offering to the Abkhaz everything that a state can offer to another side in terms of what is recognized to be the highest standards of international law. This is a kind of federation. What are they speaking about? The Abkhaz are speaking about two equal countries that can have some agreement like a confederation. This is unacceptable to us. It is my opinion that we are justified in this for many reasons. The first reason is that this is political and juridical nonsense, because Georgia is recognized in its present borders by the international community, the UN, and others. It means that it includes Abkhazia, as well. The state of Georgia, without Abkhazia, does not exist, *de jure* at least, and it is not recognized. This is the first and most broad argument.

What we have on the other hand is the peacekeeping forces. I am not afraid to acknowledge that the peacekeeping forces do not operate like bodyguards for the Abkhaz regime. The first issue, the first reason for staying there, was to allow our 300,000 refugees (too many for our small country with only 5 million people, 3 million of whom are native Georgians) to return to their homes. But this return collapsed.

One week after the South Ossetian and Georgian leaders signed and announced their memorandum, the Ossetian side made an announcement, which was a big surprise for us, that they were going to set a date for their presidential elections. During this same week, the Abkhazian side also announced that they would have elections to parliament. I want to direct your attention now to why these two things happened at the same time, and what was going on in the whole region at this time—to direct your attention to the papers that Mr. Lebed signed with Mr. Yandarbiev in Chechnya, what is going on around us, and so on. I know that there will be many questions on this, but I am not afraid to announce this. I also want to draw your attention to the organization named the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples, and when they were established as an organization, how they collapsed, and when they reanimated themselves. I want to direct your attention to all regional problems, and to take into account that everything that is going on in the Caucasus is connected with the goals, attitudes, and movements that surround us. This is because Caucasian wars, between Caucasian peoples, never existed. This was always nonsense. And I believe that these are not ethnic conflicts. These are political conflicts that are colored ethnically, because you always need an excuse, an explanation for conflict, and it is much easier to color it in ethnic terms.

What we have now in Georgia is the situation to which I referred. The excuse of the Ossetians, when we asked them what was going on, and why one week ago we had a meeting and agreed to go ahead with these positive activities, was that they have a internal political crisis, and that it would be better to negotiate with

an elected person, legitimately elected, who can act as a decisionmaker. This is the situation we have now.

Our parliament and our president, and our government, expressed their negative feelings toward this development, and we think that the credit we gave to the Russian facilitators for settling this conflict has now been spent. What could we have that is worse? Nothing. Now we are working on the issue of bringing back FOGs (Friends of Georgia), the international community, under the UN umbrella to settle this conflict. So one of the purposes of my trip is this, as well.

I also want to tell you about one major issue: the bilateral agreement between Georgia and Russia. You know that the main interest of the Russian Federation is to keep its military bases on our territory, and this has been openly announced. Our attitude toward this has been that we understand the whole context of the situation, and we understand that we have to do something about settling all our problems and moving ahead with democratic changes. Thus, we have an agreement like this, with a big condition. This condition is that these bases will be legitimized, on our territory, after the jurisdiction of Georgia is restored over the whole territory of Georgia. The reaction of the Russian Federation has been many-sided, as it always is, unfortunately, since some reactionary forces in Russia are doing one thing, while other people are doing other things and you never know how everything will be achieved. But the official explanation and the impression and expression of all these things are acceptable for us, and we are now proceeding with negotiations on all these issues. So this was the first time when our president and parliament announced their straight attitude toward involving the Russians—we gave them credit, but it did not work in Abkhazia, unfortunately.