

Georgia: European Ambitions and Regional Challenges

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James Nixey

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. I am absolutely delighted to have Dr Maia Panjikidze here with us in Chatham House. I've always said that one thing about Georgia, apart from the fact its politics are always interesting and never dull – you can take that any way you wish – is that the Georgians have always been excellent at sending over their most senior politicians and articulating their point of view on local and wider politics. I think that's what we'll do today perhaps. I know Dr Panjikidze will talk to us – at a regional level there's been a lot happening. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for example, lately very unusual events there. Then there's the slightly wider issues – another Black Sea state has undergone a rather vast transformation recently and has some similarities with Georgia. And then, of course, there's Georgia's own ambitions: its wider, almost geopolitical ambitions; its orientation, if you like. I suspect that all of these issues will be covered by Dr Panjikidze. If they're not, then you should ask her about them.

The usual rules apply. We're on the record. Twenty to twenty-five minutes, I think, from Dr Panjikidze, followed by Q&A from you, ladies and gentlemen. I should just mention also that we're on Twitter too. You can use Twitter for comments, it's #CHEvents.

I probably should also introduce Dr Panjikidze, who has been minister of foreign affairs since 2012. She has also had an enviable career, having worked in academia, politics – maybe one day business, we were just saying. Maybe I shouldn't have given that away, I'm sorry. In the far-flung future, don't let anybody get worried. But has a doctorate in philology and lectured on that subject for many years, followed by an ambassadorial career in the Netherlands and in Germany, and a senior diplomatic career in the Foreign Office now, culminating in Minister of Foreign Affairs.

That is the introduction. I've spoken for far too long already so my colleagues will be very annoyed with me already. So please, 20 to 25 minutes and we'll have a discussion after that. Welcome.

Maia Panjikidze

Thank you very much for this introduction and for the warm welcome. Thank you very much for this opportunity. It's my first official visit to London. I've never been here to work; it was always fun when I came to London. It's different now but I hope that everything will be okay in this meeting too.

I am just coming from the Parliament. We had a very interesting discussion with some members of the British Parliament on Georgia's foreign policy. The main issue the colleagues wanted to discuss with me was NATO and Georgia's way to NATO.

But let me start with the announcement that the new government which came to power after the parliamentary elections in 2012 didn't change the foreign policy priorities of the country: it's still European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Now it's a very important time for Georgia, because in two weeks' time we will sign the association agreement with the European Union, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, which is the practical part of this agreement. This brings the political association with the European Union and the economic integration into the European Union. At the same time, we are working on a visa liberalization action plan, which brings a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens, I hope, end of 2015/2016. These two foreign policy priorities are unchanged and we are following this path. We are quite successful.

Another foreign policy priority is the Euro-Atlantic integration. This is the most discussed issue now, not only in Georgia but also in the NATO member states. The next summit of NATO will take place in this country, in Wales. We are very much hopeful that this summit will bring some progress in the Georgia-NATO relationship. We hope very much that this next step of Georgia's integration into NATO will be the membership action plan, or at least the adequate reflection of Georgia's progress made in the last years.

That progress was made in Georgia, nobody discussed this issue. The testimony for that are the two elections we had in 2012 and 2013: the parliamentary elections in October 2012 and the presidential elections a year later. These elections have been praised by the international organizations and observers as fair and free – the most fair and free elections not only in Georgia but also in the entire region. We are very proud of that.

Today we are the 11th. On the 15th, in four days, we have another election in Georgia. These are local elections. They are quite different from all previous local elections because the mayors of 12 major cities in Georgia will be elected directly. This is something new for Georgia and we are confident that we'll perform in these elections on the same level as on the presidential elections in October 2013.

When I say that European and Euro-Atlantic integration are the foreign policy priorities of Georgia, I should add that it became already part of the domestic policy. Many reforms are needed for European integration and Georgia is fulfilling all criteria for the association agreement but also for the next steps of European integration. Some of the reforms are quite painful but the government has the courage to pass these reforms and to adopt new laws.

One example of such courage, I would say, was the adoption of the anti-discrimination law, which was passed just months ago. It was part of the visa liberalization action plan but I believe that it was necessary for our country because I believe that the rights of all minorities should be protected. We have now this law and we are also very proud that this law passed the parliament.

The European and Euro-Atlantic integration is something very natural for Georgia. It's something which is not discussed in the Georgian society because more than 80-85 per cent of the Georgian population supports these foreign policy priorities. There is a consensus among all major political parties.

At the same time, the new Georgian government tries to improve the relationship with Russia. I'm sure you know that we didn't have diplomatic relations with Russia – we still don't have diplomatic relations with Russia, which were stopped in 2008 after the war and occupation of one-fifth of Georgian territory. But nevertheless, the new Georgian government decided to improve relations. Former Prime Minister Ivanishvili appointed a special representative on Russian issues, who started a bilateral dialogue with the Russian representative, Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin. They already had five meetings. The next meeting will take place in the next weeks, after we sign the association agreement.

This dialogue was quite successful because this dialogue managed to reopen the Russian market for Georgian products, especially for wine and mineral water and some agricultural products. It improved the cultural and humanitarian relationship between the two countries. But unfortunately it did not impact the political situation and 20 per cent of our territory still remains occupied by Russia. Two parts of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, are still recognized as independent states by Russia and three more countries in the world (Nauru, Nicaragua and Venezuela). By the way, we are thankful that the United Kingdom supports the non-recognition policy and supports the IDP resolution in the UN, which was last time introduced just a week ago in New York with an increasing number of supporters.

When I said that it did not improve the political relationship with Russia, I mean the installation of barbed wires and fences along the occupation line and some other small or big provocations from the Russian side. But everybody is surprised that nothing worse happened in this time. We are now coming to the date of signature of the association agreement in more or less a quiet situation, which is a surprise for many experts and also for many politicians in Georgia. But that's reality and we are happy that we are passing now this period in this quiet environment. We hope very much that the statement by Karasin which he made in Prague after a meeting with his counterpart, that Russia has no plan to somehow stop the signature of the association agreement for Georgia, stands and we will sign it in the same environment like today.

The relationship with our neighbours, with Azerbaijan, Turkey and Armenia, are developing also very positively. We have a very successful cooperation, trilateral cooperation, with Azerbaijan and Turkey. We have common pipelines, as you know. Now we are building a railway connecting these three countries with each other and, at the same time, the Caspian region with the Black Sea region. Georgia's function as a transit country can be developed thanks to these pipelines and trilateral projects.

Turkey is the trade partner number one for Georgia. We need this good relationship with our neighbours, not only because of that but because we hope to be a leading country in our region, in which all other countries – some of them in conflict with each other – can meet together in Tbilisi and discuss different issues.

We have also a very good relationship with Armenia. Less trade and economic relationship because there is less potential for that, but Georgia has a crucial importance for Armenia as a transit country because it's the only connection for Armenia to Russia and to other regions.

In one sentence, Georgia tries to have a balanced policy towards every neighbour and every country in the world, to develop itself as a democratic country and to play an important role in the region. That's very briefly about the foreign policy priorities of Georgia. I think we will touch in our questions also the Ukrainian issue and the influence of this on our region, but I think it's better we'll wait for that.