

## Saltzman Research Note

September 2008

### Nino Burjanadze

Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia (2001 – 2008)

## *GEORGIA – REALITIES*

*On September 5<sup>th</sup>, Nino Burjanadze the former Speaker of the Georgian Parliament and two time acting president of Georgia, spoke at Columbia University. The event was co-sponsored by the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies and the Harriman Institute. Ms. Burjanadze's speech was extremely timely as she was able to provide insight into the origins and impact of the conflict between Russia and Georgia. She articulated the Georgian position strongly, shared her views regarding the response to this conflict from the rest of the world, and described Georgia's view regarding Russia and the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Ms. Burjanadze also had valuable insight into internal politics in Georgia and future direction in which that might move. The following is the text of her speech.*

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, let me cordially welcome you all and extend my sincere gratitude to our hosts for providing me with this special opportunity to address this distinguished audience. I would like to highlight that due to the possibilities kindly offered by the Carnegie Corporation, it is not my first address in this well-known organization as a Speaker of the Georgian Parliament but, today, it is my pleasure to address this eminent gathering in different capacity, in the capacity of the president of the Foundation for Democracy and Development.

Allow me to briefly introduce some of my personal views regarding the latest developments in Georgia. You have already seen the front pages of all the newspapers and the extensive international media coverage about the tremendously sad and worrisome events of the last several weeks. Georgia has been dragged into a conflict with the de-facto leadership of South Ossetia, followed by the open aggression of the Russian Federation which resulted in the bombing of cities, seaports, economic and military points of strategic importance and the complete annexation of two break-away regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Hundreds were killed and thousands were forced to flee their homes.

A question arises: What is Russia doing on Georgian soil? What is the ultimate goal of Russia? Is this nostalgia for the Cold War order or it is a self-isolation by an emerging Russia? Or is it a new attempt to restore the dividing wall of Berlin, this time along the post-Soviet republics?

At this stage, we all face the new grave reality. Today, we all observe Russia's attempt to change the political map of the Caucasus. As many of you might be aware, the Russian Federation has already recognized the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region, which is also known as South Ossetia.

Dear friends, I hope you all agree that this is now beyond the scope of worsening bilateral relations between two neighboring countries. This is not about Georgia any more. The developments in my country prove that in the 21st century, Russia is clearly trying to create a precedent of open violation of state sovereignty. This is an open challenge to the contemporary international order and has a great and far-reaching effect beyond a simple punishment of Georgia for its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This is an attempt at establishing a new world order; an attempt at establishing the rule of power and not the rule of law. If Russia succeeds, it will create a new precedent in international relations and send a clear message to the world that military aggression is a tolerable means for reaching certain political objectives.

Regrettably, Georgia has suffered much from Russia's need to demonstrate over and over again to the entire world that they are the only masters of the region and the South Caucasus is its area of influence and political dominance. The formula of 'contradicting everything and everyone,' particularly as concerns Western interests, still remains as a basic guideline of Russian foreign policy and still, dear friends, there is no light in the dark.

Considering NATO as enemy number one and as a hostile military anti-Russian alliance, any new enlargement of the Organization remains to be the most irritating occurrence as any new agreement of the Allies is deemed to be a deception or plot against Russia. We all witnessed the Cold War style reaction of Russia about the US-Polish negotiations on basing the anti-missile shield in Central Europe. As a direct effect of the arms-race legacy, the Russian Ministry of Defense held new generation missile-tests in northern Russia (on August 26th) that came barely a week after the US completed an accord with Poland.

During the last 15 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to identify its place and role in the new world order. At this stage, Russia is trying to rehabilitate its "imperial sole" as well as exert its influence on the post-Soviet space, Europe and even far beyond its boundaries. If the international community remains silent today, it will inevitably result in the establishment of a totalitarian regime in Europe in the 21st century that will try only to further boost its influence in the region as well as globally.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is no doubt that the open application of the independence of Kosovo as an international precedent by the Russian leadership is a very dangerous political technique, first of all for Russia itself. The latest developments in Ingushetia, one of the republics of the North Caucasus of the Russian Federation, are a vivid indication of that. As you may know, the local opposition accusing the authorities of murdering a well-known journalist has started calming its move for independence from Russia. Perhaps every such claim will entail a very severe response from Moscow but this is a process that will be very hard to seize in the future.

Despite the fact that a cease-fire agreement has been reached and signed by Georgia and Russia - through the tough diplomatic efforts of the international community, the EU, the UN, the US and the OSCE - the Russian pledges remain on paper only and yet Russian military personnel continue to block one of the principal economic routes of Georgia, the Port of Poti, as well as the military base in Senaki and other locations.

Undoubtedly, there always are two sides of the story and, today, each side to the conflict has its "own truth." Well, the famous Russian argument is that it is protecting the rights of its citizens living in the Tskhivali Region and Abkhazia. It is not a secret to anyone that granting Russian passports and citizenship to the population living in the conflict zones is a favorable method for Russian politicians, and this is the main argument for the validation of their destructive policy. The "passportization" process started years ago and, today, we are seeing the results of such illegitimate methods. In addition, the Russian authorities started an investigation on the grounds of "ethnic cleansing." Let me remind you that there were about 100,000 Ossetians in Georgia with more than 70% of them living outside of South Ossetia for years. It is more than evident that no one would exhibit an intentional hostility towards the population of the Tskhinvali Region alone, wherein half of the local population is of Georgian origin. For centuries, Georgian people have never been enemies to either Russians, Abkhazians, Ossetians or any other nationalities living in Georgia within the more than 3,000 years of its statehood. What is more, the villages located next to the dispute region controlled by Georgian side before August 7<sup>th</sup> were deliberately burned and their population was forced to flee. (The reports from Human Rights Watch provide all the proof of this.) This is what can be considered to be "ethnic cleansing."

It will sound ironic, but considering the strong statements of the Russian leaders vowing their full readiness to protect the rights of Russian citizens in every single spot worldwide, it makes us think of the fact that even a small concentration of Russian citizens may be considered as a potential threat to their host countries.

To be more serious, if we look carefully at the authentic grounds of both of these conflicts, which were created artificially in the early 1990s, it is easy to reveal that South Ossetia, as well as Abkhazia, were the so-called "slow-motion bombs" or potential levers of influence that could be used when necessary.

\* \* \*

On behalf of the Georgian people, let me express my sincere gratitude to all our American friends and partners for their expressed concern over the aggressive policy of Russia and for their readiness to assist my country. The results of the special meeting of the EU leaders in Brussels on September 1st reaffirmed the support of the whole of Europe for Georgia and its people to live in peace and stability. What is equally important, Europe has once again expressed its support for Georgia's territorial integrity and severely condemned Russia's bilateral recognition of the independence of Georgian regions. We are extremely grateful that the final document encompasses such prospects as a Free Trade Agreement and the facilitation of a visa regime with Georgia.

Undoubtedly, Russian aggression deserves a more sweeping response and many of us Georgians would have wished to have more tangible consequences than criticisms. Nevertheless, we all understand that isolating Russia could allow its leadership to ignore the values of contemporary international relations, which would contribute to further complications. In this regard, the entire

international community should use all existing levers and international mechanisms to force Russia to act in accordance with the principles of International Law.

With the recognition of the break-away regions of Georgia, Russia has identified very serious political messages. First, with this decision, it took its revenge over the European and American position on Kosovo. The Russian leadership intended to pass by any talks of an international presence in the region and already instructed the de-facto leader of South Ossetia to formally appeal to Russia for the deployment of a Russian military base therein.

Moreover, by ignoring the six-point agreement brokered by the EU presidency and recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia dilutes the relevant efforts of the US leadership and the entire international community and questions the stability in the Caucasus.

Quite simply, a modern Russia does not show even the smallest intentions of sharing the values upon which contemporary civilized relations are based.

Ladies and Gentlemen, what future do Georgian-Russian relations have? Is it a protracted hostility or is there promise for dialogue?

At the present situation, when there is the fact of open aggression, we see ourselves as a part of a wider European and international security system and consider our relations with the Russian Federation as a composite part of the multilateral international dialogue. We are ready to negotiate with Russia only within the international frames of dialogues as, regrettably, all possible bilateral formats seem to be exhausted or without result.

Without further delay, a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflicts in Georgia must be found, a solution that will be based upon the full respect for the principles of Georgia's independence, sovereignty and its territorial integrity that is recognized internationally. There is a need for the urgent internationalization of the peacekeeping format as never before. We all saw how Russia acts under the guise of a "peacekeeper" and what the prospects are in the nearest future if Russia is left as a monopolist and a sole ruler of these processes!

I believe all our friends, as well as the entire democratic community, realize that there should be mechanisms aimed at protecting small countries like Georgia from aggressors and safeguarding the values shared and respected by the international democratic community. Only through the joint efforts of this community will it be possible to defend the values which form the basis for contemporary international relations and the principles of the peaceful co-existence of sovereign states.

I would like to highlight that Russia's clearly stated intention – to change the present government of Georgia – is doomed to fail as not a single Georgian or political force will support the demand of the aggressor. Referring to the President of Georgia as a "political corpse," as Mr. Medvedev did in an interview with the Italian television channel RAI on September 2nd, is another clear confirmation of this.

Nevertheless, the crisis clearly illustrated that Georgian society, as well as the entire political spectrum, is united in protecting Georgia's statehood and its territorial integrity. It was also clear

that the democratic values and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Georgia people remain firm and irreversible in spite of Russia's severe punishment.

However, we – the Georgian people – do not consider the government as victims only and, of course, the time will come for a sober assessment of what went wrong in Georgia. I believe the Georgian people are worthy of knowing about all the decisions that so gravely effected the situation in Georgia.

Dear Friends, with your support, and with the encouragement of the international democratic community, Georgia should continue pursuing its way towards the Euro-Atlantic space, it should build a state upon the basis of genuine democracy and it should become a deserved member of the international family of democratic nations.

Today, the Georgian people need and count upon US support as never before.

Please consider this urgent appeal.

Thank you for your attention.

I am ready for your questions.