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Transcript

Georgia's Democratic Path: Past, Present and Future

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James Nixey:

Good evening and welcome to Chatham House.

It's a really fantastic, unique opportunity to discuss Georgia's past, present and future, the path to democracy – I think with a little bit of emphasis on the future, perhaps. You've seen the minister of defence's biography in the invitation so I'll actually introduce Irakli Alasania very briefly in a very different way. I have chaired, quite honestly, dozens of senior Georgia officials in my 12 years at Chatham House and I have never met anybody who is quite as intellectually honest and with the conscience and the freedom of thought as the gentleman on my right. I swear that is true, and no disrespect to any of the others, who have all been genuine in themselves. But I promise you, Irakli Alasania is really first among equals. That's all I'm going to say. Irakli will, in true Chatham House style, present for 20–25 minutes and then we will take the usual questions and answers. Sir, the floor is yours. Good to see you.

Irakli Alasania:

Thank you very much, James. It's good to be here.

We had a chance to discuss Georgian issues in a previous panel but I understand that we need to expand more now on Georgia. I'm very grateful for this opportunity. It's my first bilateral trip here in the UK as minister of defence and we had a wonderful two days of meetings, getting on the same page and note with colleagues in the ministry of defence, ministry of foreign service. So we are all very delighted to be here and to discuss Georgia.

I think what happened on 1 October fundamentally demonstrated to the world, and first of all to Georgia, that we are a democratic nation and our aspirations to build democratic institutions are irreversible. It was the first time that Georgia managed to change the government through elections and it clearly demonstrates how political maturity is getting a place in Georgia, how the public really demanded the change and the empowerment of individuals. The empowerment of individual rights that really was the cornerstone of our agenda for change in Georgia worked. I'm very proud of the Georgian people. I'm very proud of all the political actors. No matter who won or lost, it's a win for all of Georgia. This is why I do believe that since the elections the cohabitation with the power which is now in minority in the parliament is really getting more and more foot-on-the-ground. It's a very unique experience for us because it's the first time Georgia has the president that is representative of one party and the parliament – and the popularly elected government that is governing the country – from the winning bloc. So this is a unique

opportunity for us as well to go through this test of democracy again. I'm very proud of our people, again, that we are going through this process with the intellectual and political maturity that Georgia deserves.

I'm going to talk a little bit about how the change occurred. I cannot avoid mentioning a few main reasons for the success that the Georgian public and Georgian population made this change with.

First of all, I think the most important thing that happened was the unification of all the political opposition. All the viable, healthy opposition were brought together by the political organization which was called and is called Georgian Dream. The leader of this coalition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was a very low-profile man in Georgia publicly but has a unique and big experience in business management and who is a patriot of Georgia, has managed to really build this coalition around him.

The second most effective success recipe was that we managed to go down on the grassroots levels and campaign in every village of Georgia, no matter what obstacles we were encountering from the local government or the police. Let me tell you, the pre-election campaign was very bitter. The emotions, the polarization was very high. But the Georgian public said that we cannot change the government yet again with revolution, we cannot change the government yet again through violence. This was the demonstration of the biggest maturity for these elections to be successful.

I believe the responsibility that now lies on our government and on the opposition as well is really dictating that we have to go through the very delicate process of cohabitation. That was the reason behind, for example, how we selected the chairman of the joint chiefs. With tremendous differences, fundamental differences in ideology with the National Movement, we said that the army, the defence of my country, the security of our country is something that both political organizations respect and we have to demonstrate this. It was yet again a demonstration that there are things above us. There are things above the political, so to say, opposition.

Just a few days ago the prime minister and the president appeared together in front of the public, when they congratulated the patriarch with his 80th birthday and also 35 years of being the patriarch. So it was also again a demonstration to the public that yes, we have differences. We had a very bitter pre-election campaign. There was a lot of restriction; there was a lot of oppression coming from the previous government against the opposition. But we are putting this behind us and we want to move forward.

I think this is the great lesson for the region. I think this is a success that can stimulate more progressive changes not only in the Caucasus but in the whole area, when post-Soviet states are also undergoing the transition that we all need to see, we all want to see. So there is a certain example that the Georgians are setting. That's why we are very proud of that.

Among priorities for the new government, first and foremost is of course to build back the trust of the Georgian public in the government. What motivated people to vote for us was not only the services that were not getting to them; it was not only the lack of business opportunities for all – only selective people. Mainly people voted for us because there was a profound sense of injustice in the public. This is why we first and foremost started with de-politicizing the state institutions and making sure we are making the right steps forward to make the independence of the judiciary work. In the defence field, for example, we are working hard with the NGO and civil society members to have the full democratic control of the armed forces by the civil service. Also we are putting in place the instruments to have the viable and effective parliamentary oversight which didn't exist in Georgia. For example, for nine years there was not a single hearing in the parliament on how we are spending the public money, how we are spending the budget, how we are using our operational and intelligence capability, whether we were using them against the political opposition. So there was unfortunately, for a long time, a one-party parliament. It was a one-man country. This is now changing.

But at the same time, we are very mindful that Georgia came along this way because previous governments were successful in certain things. So we are basing our future success on already-built institutions, the successes that previous governments – not only this government but also the [Eduard] Shevardnadze government – put in place. So it is something that we do respect, the institutional memory and the institutions, and the continuity will be ensured. For example, in the ministry of defence we only changed a handful of people, the political appointees; the main civil service people are staying because they know how to work, they are patriots of this country, and in this de-monopolized political environment they will really have more effective ways to contribute to Georgia's defence and security.

We are building our defence doctrine now. It is based on, for example, the SDR (strategic defence review) that was proposed and worked through the previous government. We just added our adaptation and in the nearest month or so it will be put in place. We want to have a defence doctrine that will be fed also by the lessons learned, which was never done in Georgia. Georgia is the only country that had three wars with Russia in the past 20 years but the

military successes or mistakes were never analysed. So this is why we are working hard now to put together the analysis of what went wrong on the strategic, operational and tactical level, so we can feed this into the future doctrine and not make the same mistakes in the future.

Our very openly, very clearly declared foreign policy goals are to fully integrate Georgia into the Euro-Atlantic community. We believe, and Georgians believe first of all, that Georgia belongs to Europe. This is why the foreign policy objectives were also demonstrated when the first visit of the prime minister in the government was held in Brussels, when we met with the officials and the leaders of the European Union and the secretary general of NATO. That was a very clear choice of the Georgian public that we are committed to. We are working hard now, this year is not a summit year for NATO but for next year we want to be prepared, that we are putting forward the reforms that will enhance Georgia's interoperability with NATO allies. It will enhance Georgia's closeness with the European Union, through the association agreement that is forged very shortly. We will make sure that we are not only talking like Europeans, we want to make sure you understand that we are also acting like Europeans. This is why institutional changes and assurance of accountability of the government to the public will be in place, so this progress will be adequately assessed by the summit and by the allies in NATO.

We are also the government who sent an additional battalion after the elections to Afghanistan, again committing ourselves to the global security in Afghanistan. I visited the region just a few months ago and I saw how our soldiers are proudly working to make Afghanistan secure and make the world secure. We are there specifically for the reasons, and clearly for us, to make sure that Georgia is contributing, not only accepting, security assistance. This is very important for the Georgian armed forces. This is very important for the combat experience they are gaining there. This will be built back into the Georgian force structure and defence capabilities. So this is something that the new government is committing itself.

But at the same time we are thinking that we have to have a very pragmatic view on the relationship with Russia. Russia occupies 20 per cent of my land. We make no mistake: this political attitude will never change in the coming days or months, or years maybe. But there is no alternative other than to talk to them on the issues that we can make progress on. That's why it was a very pragmatic decision by the government, and specifically the prime minister, to appoint his special representative to work with Russia on trade issues. We accepted Russia's membership in the WTO. I think we earned the right to

now talk with Russia, to make the same opportunities for Georgian businesses that Russian businesses have in Georgia. Russian businesses with no obstacles were operating in the Georgian market. We want now to gain back the Russian market for our agriculture, for our economy. It's very important.

But we don't have illusions that their political stance on Georgian territorial integrity or Georgia's aspiration to join NATO will change anytime soon. But we think by having a pragmatic, workable relationship with Russia, it will give us more space to develop ourselves, to develop our democratic institutions. Also it will hopefully give us more space to deal on confidence-building measures with the Abkhaz and Ossetians, because we want to demonstrate that we are not only declaratively saying that we are not going to change the territorial problems or solve the territorial problems with Russia by military means, but we are also acting to reintroduce ourselves to the Abkhaz and Ossetians, to make them feel comfortable in dealing with Georgia – again, on the economy, on trade, on joint agricultural projects, joint infrastructure projects. The key to success everywhere in the world on conflict resolution is the economy. When people are talking, when people are trading, of course there is less and less chance to evoke further military escalation.

Our job – and I have the deputy chairman of the joint chiefs, Colonel [Vladimer] Chachibaia, here as well – is to ensure that Georgia will have capable armed forces – rapid reaction armed forces, manoeuvrable armed forces – that will deter possible escalation on the military side. But also we want to make sure that we are ready to counter the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency threat. This is why we need to develop ourselves in a way that the Georgian army will be capable to deter any kind of military aggression. It will take time. This is why we are concentrating now not on buying fancy weapons, but we are concentrating now conceptually to make the Georgian soldier and Georgian officer – to make the environment they can conduct their duties to defend this country.

This is why my emphasis now is on the education, the military education. This is what we are talking about with our counterparts here. Our emphasis is on logistics, our emphasis is on the infrastructure, to make sure that Georgian soldiers understand that the government is taking care of them and they should be more educated and more equipped with the necessary tools to defend the country. This is a long way.

We are thinking about medium-term strategy as well, that in four years – after 2016 – we are going to go fully professional. We are going to have a

professional army that will be capable of addressing the regional security threats that Georgia has. But it takes time. This is why now it's time for Georgia to have the long-term strategy. This is now a time for Georgia to think about where we want to be 10–15 years from now.

This is why I think in the new political reality and environment, we have this kind of opportunity. Because, first, we demonstrated again with this election that we are even closer to Europe, by changing the government through the election means. Again, we know and understand another test is going through how we are going to cohabitate with the party that was put in minority. And we are facing another test which will be coming soon, the presidential election. Even more importantly, we will have two years from now the local elections. These local elections mean really for Georgia to consolidate democratic gains and to shift the centralized power to the regions, to give them more possibilities and responsibilities to write their own fate. This will be really, when we are going to go through it, the main so-to-say commodity of Georgia in the eyes of our allies in the West.

At the same time, I want to say that what we are trying to do now, after the lessons learned in previous elections, is we want to first and foremost really make the environment for competitive elections. This means that we have to have finally fixed voter lists. This is why we commissioned – it's not going to be able for us to do this this year, but next year there is going to be a census, the first time for decades I think. The census will provide information: what is the population of Georgia? How many people are allowed to vote? So vote stealing will not be any possibility for our government or future governments.

We want to make sure that the media is accessible for everybody, not only selected political leaders and political organizations. We want to make sure that there is going to be a competitive environment in business, which is very important – 75 per cent of the time that the prime minister is spending is to devise the economic strategy that will be lucrative for investments, that will bring back investors' confidence in Georgia, by de-monopolizing the business environment. Also, making a strong and independent judiciary, without which it's impossible to really gain advantage and to attract investors.

So all of this is something that not only we are thinking about but we are already acting. There are a lot of laws already in the parliament – for example, preparing to make this de-monopolized environment institutional and legal. We are working very hard with allies. For example, as defence minister I have to say, how are we going to prepare our armed forces in the post-ISAF environment in Afghanistan? This is also a huge commitment for

Georgia, such a small country, but we understand that this is very much needed. We cannot leave halfway the situation in Afghanistan. So this is why we think probably we are going to be in more non-combatant missions, but we are going to train, equip and assist the Afghan armed forces and security forces to be more capable. These are also the contributions Georgia is making as a state, as an independent state, to global security.

Regional security is something we are also spending a lot of time on. The first trip that the prime minister made was in Azerbaijan, then Armenia. In a few weeks we are going to have the prime minister's and my visit in Turkey. We want to make sure that regional stability and regional projects that were started with previous governments will continue.

The forging of Georgia as a transit route of energy and other commodities from Central Asia will be irreversible. We are working hard also to make Georgia attractive for the reverse transit from Afghanistan after the withdrawal process will start. All of this will make Georgia stronger; all of this will make Georgia more stable.

What is most important, we really want to make sure that Georgia's civil servants will be put in a place where they do not have to choose which political organization to support, because they will be de-politicized. We want to make sure that a middle class is emerging in Georgia. Without a middle class, as we discussed in the previous panel, there is no democracy.

So this is why all the aspirations that we were talking about in past years – some of them materialized but a bunch of them need to be addressed by the new government. Again, we are not shying away but acknowledging when there is a success of previous governments. We have to acknowledge, give credit to the past government and move forward and fix the challenges we have in the future.

Our government is future-oriented. Our government is working hard to create new opportunities for the people – for the individual first of all – to make them believe that the state is for them and not against them. This pluralistic environment that we have now in the parliament – as I mentioned, for nine years it was a one-party parliament and criticism was not heard in parliament. Now it's completely different. We are arguing; we are debating things. This is why I hope and I'm sure that this debate will not be shifted anywhere in the streets, because we have the political system that encompasses both parties together to work and disagree – but it's going to be within the system.

So I'm very optimistic about Georgia's future. I'm very optimistic about Georgia's integration process into the Euro-Atlantic community. We don't

have illusions that it's going to happen overnight but we know exactly what we want. This is why the reform and why the policies that we are putting in will serve Georgia's national security interest but also will make Georgia more predictable, a stable partner for the West.

I will end on this and I will be glad to answer your questions.