

Dr. Khatuna Burkadze - It is essential to accelerate Georgia's membership in NATO through the strong support of the US and other members of the Alliance.



*Interpressnews discussed strategic co-operation between Georgia and the United States with **Dr. Prof. Khatuna Burkadze**, a fellow researcher at Geocase, an alumna of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and the Harvard Program on Negotiations.*

- As it is known on November 17 the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo visited Georgia. How do you evaluate the visit of the US Secretary of State?

- In the very turbulent time in the region, the visit of the US Secretary of State has illustrated that the US strongly supports Georgia. Strategic partnership with the US will assist Georgia to overcome existing challenges.

The parties had many important topics to discuss. They spoke about the difficult humanitarian situation in the occupied regions. The Secretary of State reaffirmed the unwavering support of the United States for Georgia's territorial integrity in the face of Russian occupation.

They discussed the important role of the US in the Geneva International Discussions. The parties paid special attention to strengthening Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. They talked about all key priorities of the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter.

Due to the recent developments in Georgia, the US Secretary of State and Prime Minister of Georgia discussed the importance of free and fair elections and the essential role of an independent judiciary for the Georgian democracy.

Overall, the US Secretary of State's visit is a clear signal to the Russian Federation that Georgia represents a strategic partner for the US in the region.

Multi-dimensional co-operation with the United States will assist Georgia to achieve its greater goals on its Euro-Atlantic path and enhance our strategic ties.

- Because of the recent developments in the region Georgia faces threats. Stability is important for Georgia. However, after the 2020 parliamentary elections, disagreement between the ruling and opposition parties impedes Georgia's development effectively and consistently.

In your opinion how should the parties find a solution and reach a consensus?

- Due to the recent changes in the region Georgia faces serious threats. Simultaneously, in the time of coronavirus, it is essential to overcome health, economic, social and other challenges through joint engagement and efforts. Also, a stable environment is an important precondition for the state institutions to effectively implement their objectives in the global crisis.

Therefore, I think that negotiation is a pragmatic way to solve existing problems and reach a consensus between the ruling and opposition parties. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration the legitimate interests of all parties.

- You mentioned that the parties discussed all key priorities of the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter.

Could you talk about the importance of the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter? What are the priorities of this document?

- On January 9, 2009, in Washington D.C. the Charter on Strategic Partnership between Georgia and the United States was signed. This Charter represents the central framework of bilateral strategic relations between Georgia and the United States. It supports Georgia's territorial integrity, political independence, strengthening democracy and stability.

The Charter clarifies the four fields of bilateral cooperation: defense and security cooperation; economic, trade and energy cooperation; strengthening democracy; increasing people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

According to the Charter deepening Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions is a mutual priority, and they plan to undertake a program of enhanced security cooperation intended to increase Georgian capabilities and to strengthen Georgia's candidacy for NATO membership. The United States and Georgia intend to pursue a structured plan to increase interoperability and coordination of

capabilities between NATO and Georgia, including via enhanced training and equipment for Georgian forces.

In terms of economic and trade relations, the United States and Georgia intend to expand cooperation to support economic reforms. The United States endeavours to facilitate the integration of Georgia into the global economy and appropriate international economic organizations.

The Charter underlines: 'Recognizing the importance of a well-functioning, market-oriented energy sector, the United States and Georgia intend to explore opportunities for increasing Georgia's energy production, enhance the energy efficiency, and increase the physical security of energy transit through Georgia to European markets'.

The Charter pays special attention to strengthening democratic institutions including media freedom, the rule of law, civil society, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and anti-corruption efforts.

According to the Charter, the United States and Georgia share a desire to increase people-to-people contacts and enhance cultural, educational and professional exchange programs that promote democracy and democratic values and increase mutual understanding.

The content of the Charter demonstrates that strategic relations between the United-States-Georgia firstly give the Georgian government real opportunities to make reforms in different spheres for finalizing successfully institutional building process through the support of a strategic ally. As for the United States, Georgia represents a reliable partner for the US in this region and at the same time, Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic and European institutions will serve as a model for former Soviet states. An independent, sovereign and democratic Georgia can respond to security challenges and continue to make a valuable contribution in the process of maintaining international peace.

- As we mentioned the security environment has been changed in the region. More precisely, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement was signed on 9 November by the President of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of Armenia and the President of Russian Federation. According to the agreement, 1960 Russian military forces should be deployed to the region. It will change the balance of power.

In light of the foregoing considerations, how should we strengthen defense and security co-operation with the US?

Georgia-U.S. defense and security co-operation highlights. More precisely, the U.S.-Georgia Security Co-operation Framework aims to develop readiness and sustainable capabilities as well as modernization of the Georgian Defense Forces. Over the last six years, the United States has provided close to \$100 million in security assistance to Georgia.

The main areas of this bilateral military cooperation are Georgia Defense Readiness Program (GDRP), Combat Training Center (CTC) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM). These programmes and activities support the development of Georgia's defensive capabilities.

However, because of the changing security environment, we need to strengthen defense and security co-operation with our strategic partner including in the field of cyber defense. Unfortunately, Georgia is a target of cyberattacks in the cyber era. Nowadays, ensuring secure cyberspace is one of the key priorities of national security policies.

In light of the foregoing considerations, it is essential to develop new initiatives for enhancing defense and security capabilities. One of the new initiatives could be the establishment of joint the US-Georgia Center to counter hybrid threats. Also, the expansion of joint-exercises and continuation of the development of appropriate infrastructure will enhance our security in the region and increase abilities to overcome challenges effectively.

- Electoral college confirmed Joseph R. Biden's victory in the presidential election. In your opinion how will the US-Georgia strategic partnership be deepened under the administration of President Joseph R. Biden? What kind of priorities would be essential for our strategic relations in the next four years?

- Georgia has bipartisan support. One of the examples of this support is a bipartisan bill – 'Georgia Support Act' that was passed by the House of Representatives on October 22, 2019. Also, in recent years, Consolidated Appropriations Acts include important provisions that guarantee effective implementation of non-recognition policy, and it is therefore further proof of steady US support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. More precisely, 'none of the funds appropriated by this Act may be made available for assistance for the central government of a country that the Secretary of State determines and reports to the Committees on Appropriations has recognized the independence of, or has established diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia'

As for priorities of future strategic co-operation between Georgia and America under the administration of President Joseph R. Biden, President-elect Joseph R. Biden is a strong supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and political independence. He visited Georgia in 2008 and 2009. In 2009 Joseph Biden, as the US Vice President addressed to all Georgian people at the Georgian Parliament. He underlined: 'We stand by the principle that sovereign democracies have the right to make their own decisions, and choose their own partnerships and their own alliances. We stand against the 19th-century notion of spheres of influence. It has no place in the 21st century'.

During election campaign President-elect Joseph R. Biden in his article 'Why America Must Lead Again' emphasized importance of NATO. President-elect Joseph R. Biden highlighted: 'NATO is at the very heart of the United States' national security, and it is the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal—an alliance of values'. Nowadays, it is essential to accelerate Georgia's membership in NATO through the strong support of the US and other members of the Alliance.

Under the administration of President Joseph R. Biden, I believe that our relations will deepen and bring new initiatives in terms of enhancing strategic partnership in the fields of democracy, defense and security, economy and people-to-people relations. More precisely, it would be essential to focus on the following 7 key priorities: 1) Continuing support of Georgia's sovereignty, independence, and

territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders; 2) Continuing support of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic and European integration; 3) Support continued development of democratic values and institutions in Georgia, including free and fair elections, judicial reform, the rule of law, public sector transparency and accountability, and anti-corruption efforts; 4) Deepening bilateral defense and security cooperation aimed at the enhancement of Georgia's deterrence, resilience, and self-defense, especially assisting Georgia in defense against Russia's cyber-enabled warfare by increasing the US cybersecurity cooperation with Georgia; 5) Continuing assisting Georgia to improve its capabilities to combat Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns; 6) Launching the negotiations on a free-trade agreement between Georgia and the US. In this regard, it is essential to highlight Georgia's strategic location, located at the critical crossroads. A free-trade agreement would encourage greater American investment in Georgia as well as increase the number of American tourists and strengthen cooperation between Georgia and America in the security sphere; 7) Continuation of increasing People-to-People, educational and cultural exchanges. In this context, it would be beneficial to create opportunities for direct flights to the United States in the future.

I think that this strategic agenda will assist Georgia to successfully finalize institutional reforms in different fields and establish a strong basis for being a European democratic state in the region.

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