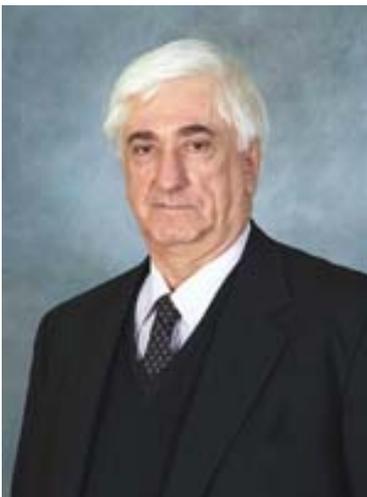


“IT’S IN GEORGIA’S INTEREST TO BE FRIENDLY WITH RUSSIA”

Interview with Dr. Alexander Rondeli*

Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Associate Editor of CRIA

CRIA: Considering the expected removal of the EU’s special representative to the South Caucasus and the recent visit of the EU’s High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs to Georgia, what sort of changes would you say are on the horizon for the EU–Georgia relationship?



Rondeli: From Georgia’s point of view the complicated process of integration with European structures and the Europeanization of Georgia is a long one. It’s not easy to go through not only because of weaknesses in and problems with our own development, but also because of the EU’s policy, that is, the policy of certain leading countries in the EU, and EU–Russia relations. It’s not only a process whereby you get ready, then you are ready [and the EU says], “please be our guest, be our member.”

On both fronts we have serious problems, because for any post-Soviet country, meeting the EU’s requirements is not easy. The Baltic [countries] are the exception for many reasons, for many good reasons, and we are happy that at least they are there. They are also a fantastic example and a role model for us. But meeting these criteria is not easy.

Everyone understands that there is a long way to go.

The second dimension of this is just as complicated because the EU is not united, especially from the point of view of foreign policy and military strategy. There’s often a general, common way of thinking about certain issues within the EU. But when it comes to expansion, admitting new members and relations with Russia, there are many contradictions and many uncertainties. One cannot accuse the EU alone for this, because the EU is also a new entity. It’s not a newborn child but it’s a very young organization, a very young entity which has failed to develop a common foreign policy, and is just learning to do so. So, they have their own problems as well.

If you look at it from this angle, then we can say that not everything depends on us, unfortunately. Sometimes it’s an excuse for our not performing well, but we know that even if we perform perfectly well, the serious problem of EU–Russia relations remains. This is something no one can escape, no one can say that it doesn’t exist. It’s absolutely clear that Russia doesn’t want to see any of its neighbors in the EU. If you in the West ask Russia [about Georgia’s EU aspirations], they

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immediately say, “We do not care if someone wants to go and join the EU. It’s wonderful.” But this is a lie. In bilateral relations and conversations Russia always tells us, “We won’t let you go to the EU.” The country that joins the EU is lost to Russia forever. So this is a very complicated question, and most of the population still doesn’t understand how complicated the situation is. They see everything in a more simplified way.

CRIA: Does the Georgian public, in your view, generally agree with the government’s pro-Western agenda?

Rondeli: We all ask ourselves this question, that is, people who agree with trying to move our country towards the West. We sometimes ask ourselves, “Are we sure of what we are doing and is it really necessary to do it?” For Georgians who understand, or at least who pretend to understand, why we have to join the EU, the formula is very clear: to make Georgia a viable state, a viable, inclusive, modern nation, you have to be a democratic state. So, the drive to make Georgia democratic is not just a passing fancy. No! It’s a strategic necessity, because Georgia has different ethnic and confessional groups, and their interests can be vast but accommodated only within a democratic system. It’s why Georgia sees itself as part of Europe, as part of Euro-Atlantic structures, because, in that way, Georgia can survive and proceed with the democratization process.

We also want to escape Russia’s grip. Not because we don’t like Russia or we hate Russia. That’s not the point at all. The problem is one of national perspective. We don’t want to see Georgia under Russian control or under Russian protection, because then Georgia cannot become a democracy since the Russians are not interested in that. And even if they were very interested, they don’t know how to do it.

I think it’s absolutely clear why we want to join. But another question is, is Europe ready? Is the EU ready, or is NATO ready to accept us? Even if they are one day – and it looks like it could happen one day – they believe that they have to ask Russia’s permission, and these contradictions start immediately. If these western European leaders say, “we don’t care what Russia thinks; you [Georgians] are free, and whenever you’re ready we’ll accept you,” well, it is not true. We know it pretty well.

CRIA: Do the recent developments – the opening of the Upper Lars border, the resumption of direct Tbilisi–Moscow flights – signal any shift in Georgia–Russia relations? Should Georgia try to rekindle full economic ties with Russia?

Rondeli: Everyone, in any region of the world, has to develop in cooperation with others. They have to have normal, even very friendly relations. Geography dictates this, and it cannot be escaped. We know from international relations theory that the biggest disaster for small countries is to be a neighbor of a giant, and it’s worse if that giant is your former master. It’s in Georgia’s interest to be friendly with Russia, to have it as a healthy and wealthy neighbor. This means that Russia can be a good market, a source of investments, even a protector, if it becomes democratic – a stabilizing factor in the whole region. For example, if Russia is wealthy and healthy, tourists come, investment flows in. No one is against this. Georgians like Russians, maybe even more than Russians like Georgians, because we have lived together for centuries. And we should capitalize on these long-standing ties.

But unfortunately, Russia’s approach to Georgia was blackmail and bullying, as seen in the August 2008 war. Georgia’s only sin was that it wanted to be independent, and to be a democracy and a possible EU member some day. Georgia was punished for this, from the beginning of

independence. Russia chose to make an example of Georgia for other post-Soviet states under Russian influence to see, lest they get same ideas. This is why the stalemate exists, and why Russia occupies our territories. And the fact that the international community does not accept this occupation as a *fait accompli* or as an action within international law shows that Georgia is right.

How do we get out of this situation? Well, the international community has to help us; in fact they have to help both sides. Because both sides have problems: there are millions of people who need to have mobility between the countries, so the humanitarian aspect is relevant.

They opened the border at Lars because of Armenia, which was in desperate economic straits. We neighbors in the region have to help each other despite our pride. But the fact is that Russia closed it, and Russia opened it. Russia introduced the visa regime with Georgia, imposed an economic embargo on us, stopped flights... All these things were done so that Russia could show Georgia it cannot live without them. We cannot influence them. We did survive, though, and now Russia understands that it's better to deal with us by using more soft power.