Nino Burjanadze, acting president of Georgia (2003-2004 & 2007-2008)
Anna Sous, RFE/RL
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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: Nino Anzorovna, you're often called the only pro-Russian politician in Georgia. Some even go so far as to call you the mouthpiece of Russian policy. On the other hand, you're one of very few who can negotiate with Russian without losing you are one of very few, who can negotiate with Russia without losing territories in the process. Would you call yourself a pro-Russian politician?

Nino Burjanadze: Of course not. Firstly, there's no basis for calling me a mouthpiece of Russian politics. This is a cliche that was created at some point in order to totally ignore my views and undermine what was really a very important political vision. I don't consider myself to be a pro-Russian politician. In general, it's wrong for politicians to call themselves pro-Russian or pro-Western. One should be a politician representing the interests of one's own country and its people. I believe it is an absolute must for Georgia, or any other country, to remain in a state of dialogue with all other states, especially the neighboring states, and even more so when your neighbor is a nuclear superpower.

Anna Sous: You served twice as the acting president of Georgia and twice as the speaker of the Georgian Parliament. During your time at the helm of the parliament and at the helm of the state what was the best day in relations between Georgia and Russia? And what was the worst?

Nino Burjanadze: I remember my conversation with President Vladimir Putin in 2003 after the [Rose] Revolution. I was the acting president at the time. It was followed by another visit to Moscow, which naturally was supported by the other leaders of the revolution -- [Mikheil] Saakashvili and [Zurab] Zhvania. I very well remember [Putin and I] being in agreement that relations between Russia and Georgia were leading nowhere at the time, that there had been complex problems and that there was a need to start afresh from a clean, white, new page. And such an agreement was reached. I also was de facto preparing the next meeting between reelected President Mikheil Saakashvili and Vladimir Putin [in 2008]. That meeting created very important opportunities.

Anna Sous: And the worst day?

Nino Burjanadze: The worst day... This was after my departure [as parliament speaker]. It has to be in 2008 [during the Russia-Georgia war]. It was a terrible tragedy, although there were [other] difficulties in Russia-Georgia relations. I remember, for example, [also] in 2008, when I was still the speaker of the parliament, we stood on the verge of war. Russia's railway troops entered Abkhazia claiming they needed to restore the work of the railways. Here in our camp, so to speak, there were many people who thought that was a good

reason to start military action against Russia. Thank God, I managed to talk some sense into them and we averted a horrible tragedy. But two months after I left, there was nobody to convince Saakashvili not to do foolish things. And, sadly, we got what we got -- a big tragedy in 2008.

Anna Sous: You've said many times that this tragedy could have been averted. Is it possible that Russia wouldn't have attacked Georgia that year, or even a year or two later?

Nino Burjanadze: No, it wouldn't have attacked. The tension had already been there for 15 years. And to be sure, it was a painful topic for Georgia. Of course, Russia had played its negative role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But over those 15 years the tension, thank God, had never reached the point of an open military conflict. There even had been some progress, particularly in South Ossetia. There were ways to navigate the situation towards a resolution. Had Saakashvili not done what he did, there wouldn't have been a war. And however much it pains me to say it, regardless of how unpleasant it is to talk about it, I must say it, because if we hide the truth... First of all, the truth is not being hidden. It all is spelled out in [Swiss diplomat Heidi] Tagliavini's report. It was Saakashvili who started to bomb Tskhinvali; he ordered the bombing. Of course, it is possible there were forces in Russia that had wanted a war, and were getting ready for this war. So even more so, when you know that there are forces that want to provoke you, you must not let them do so. This war could have been prevented, 100 percent. I am saying it with full responsibility. I know it. A time will come for an objective investigation of this war. All will be made clear as to why it happened.

Anna Sous: What is permitted and what is not permitted in the relations of a small post-Soviet state with Russia? And what should never be done?

Nino: Burjanadze: You know, Russia should not be teased. In general no one should be teased, not even a small neighboring state. Because anyone can do harm. A [peaceful] solution should be sought for any conflict. The goal is to gain respect for a nation's interests from all its neighbors -- small and large. And there is no need for screaming. A normal dialogue is needed. The mutual interest must be found and spelled out. All neighboring states everywhere in the world have mutual interests. It cannot be otherwise. Despite the differences in interests between Russia and Georgia, there are some that coincide -- for example, peace in the Caucasus. Russia, in order to achieve peace in the Caucasus -- the North and South Caucasus -- must coordinate its actions [with others]. Russia needs Georgia as a friendly neighbor, because it is needed for the peace in the North Caucasus. It's in the best interests of both and can be used to boost mutual cooperation. In general, Russia has no benefit in supporting separatism. It's obvious, because Russia is a federation.

Anna Sous: But it does support separatism.

Nino Burjanadze: We must make sure it doesn't support separatism. But using force is not an option. This won't work through force. This won't work through yelling about joining NATO. It won't work through shouting that Russia is bad, because that's not politics. A country like Georgia can't allow itself not to talk to its neighbors. We must talk, we must have a fruitful dialogue, and we must convince Russia that having normal relations with

Georgia is more beneficial for Russia itself than supporting separatism or any other negative developments.

Anna Sous: Your visit to Moscow [in July 2015] was related to this very point. At the invitation of the State Duma Chairman [Sergei Naryshkin], you visited Russia and then returned home to deliver a message from high-ranking Russian functionaries to their Georgian counterparts, suggesting it was time to start a dialogue in order to divert Russia-Georgian relations from hitting a dead end. Was this message received?

Nino Burjanadze: No. Nobody wanted to listen.

Anna Sous: Why?

Nino Burjanadze: I don't know. You should ask those in power in Georgia. This also is an indication of how abnormal the situation in Georgia is right now. They could have at least listened. Listening would not have obliged the Georgian authorities to do anything. They could have said, 'Yes, we listened to Mrs. Burjanadze. But the proposals didn't seem important to us, they didn't seem realistic.' But they were afraid to even hear them, in case they were later labeled as pro-Russian politicians. I am positive -- I have met with the highest ranks of Russian leadership, I know and I am confident -- that Russia is interested in normalizing relations with Georgia. Russia is untested when it comes to redirecting relations onto some normal path. All that's needed is political will, and no fear of being called pro-Russian.

Anna Sous: I was just about to ask: You're talking about cliches, about labeling somebody as a pro-Russian politician. Is it hard to work in Georgia when those labels are attached to you?

Nino Burjanadze: At the very beginning, when I was first called pro-Russian, it made me smile, as it completely contradicted my political image and my political platform. Later, when not only small, general cliches were heard but more defined charges started to appear, it certainly became unpleasant. It hurts, especially when you have children, family, like-minded people around you, who all get bad publicity and are called "traitors of the motherland." But, when you're in politics you must ask yourself: The things that you're doing, are they right? Are they in accordance with your beliefs? I'm positive that what I'm doing now is the right thing, and that there's no other way. Name me at least one case in the world's history -- perhaps there is something I don't know about -- when territorial disputes have been resolved without dialogue.

Anna Sous: I wanted to talk to you about the annexation of Crimea by Russia. You have more than once said, "Crimea is now a part of Russia and will never be part of Ukraine again. What Ukraine needs to worry about now is not losing any more territories. The situation with Crimea is irreversible." It may not be the most correct comparison, but it looks like the situation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is also irreversible.

Nino Burjanadze: No. It's wrong to make this comparison. First of all, there are no totally identical situations in history. Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are completely different cases. Firstly, 95 percent of the Crimean population are not pro-Russian -- they are Russians.

This should have been taken into account by the Ukrainian leadership. And I'm not even talking about history here. Who owned what and when is not a foundation for contemporary international law. Let's say it: A referendum took place. And practically nobody doubts the results of this referendum, because almost the entire population -- 90 percent -- took part in it. We know the result perfectly well. In Abkhazia and South Osetia ethnic cleansing had been conducted. This means that referendums and elections took place after [a large part of] the native population had been kicked out from the country. There were some 350,000 refugees from Abkhazia and about 150,000 from South Ossetia. Let's return all those people to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, conduct a referendum, and then talk. If they vote for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be independence, we would have to accept it. But I don't think that 350,000 people exiled from Abkhazia and 150,000 exiled from South Ossetia will vote for independence. I'm sure they would vote for coexistence within a unified Georgian state.

Anna Sous: In one interview, you said that little Georgia has no chance of winning against Russian soldiers. Were you afraid of Russian soldiers in August 2008? Were you afraid of Russia?

Nino Burjanadze: I cannot say I was afraid of anybody. I was afraid of what was happening on our territory. Surely if a soldier, a Russian or someone from any other country, picks up a gun and aims it at your little country -- any such soldiers, any such army, should be feared. The situation should not be pushed to this, no matter what. And this was obvious. I was infuriated by having to convince Saakashvili's people that one can't go to war with Russians. One shouldn't fight with Russians -- they know how to do it, they've proved it many times. And it's especially bad for a little country like Georgia to be fighting with Russia.

Anna Sous: You once said that Putin is not an enemy of Georgia. Do you maintain any contact with Vladimir Putin?

Nino Burjanadze: I can't say... What to does it mean to maintain contact? I do hope I will meet him in the future, because I believe the meetings that have already taken place were very important and very interesting. And I indeed see that this man is not an enemy of Georgia. First of all, he's a serious politician. I assume nobody is going to doubt this. And due to his seriousness he simply cannot be a friend or an enemy of any state. He is a representative of his own state and fights for the interests of his state. He is very pragmatic about it. Why should he be an enemy of Georgia? Naturally, he has his own country and the interests of this country in mind, and those interests lie not only within its borders. [To have such interests] is a sign of any big country. The goal of small states should be to make sure that those interests are not harmful to the interests of small states. That's it.

Anna Sous: Is it possible to have a fruitful dialogue with him now?

Nino Burjanadze: Of course, it most certainly is. If it were impossible to negotiate with him, [Angela] Merkel, [John] Kerry and other representatives of global politics wouldn't have been coming to talk to him. So I think it is wrong to even raise this question. He's a serious politician. He's a man who, in my experience, can keep his word. In any case, whatever he promised to us, to Georgia, he delivered on.