

**TALK AT NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE BY MR. DAVID GAMKRELIDZE, MP
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Before I begin, allow me to thank Ambassador Ledsky and Tom for organizing this event, and to thank all of you for coming. Given that many of our guests today know much about Georgia, I will go directly to the issues that are affecting our country and what I propose we do to overcome some of our challenges. My remarks will be brief, to ensure that we have sufficient time for questions. As a result, please excuse me if I do not directly address every one of the issues which is of concern to me and my party, as well as our American friends. My goal today is to discuss the political situation in Georgia, and the question of the future of Georgian democracy, addressing the issues that impact the development of our democratic institutions and what can be done to improve and strengthen them.

The fact still remains true that compared to all other countries of the former Soviet Union, with the exception of the Baltics, Georgia presents a special opportunity for real and full democratic consolidation. Denying this, as some have tried to do, ignores the strength of Georgian peoples' desire to live in a liberal democratic society; the influence of Georgian civil society, both in the non-profit and business worlds; and the openness of the Georgian political scene. However, there are great threats that we face in the transition.

For much of the 1990s, Georgia political landscape was completely dominated by one political party, the Citizens Union of Georgia. By the year 2000, this party was turning into a mild form of the Soviet Communist party. CUG's leadership did not allow for an opposition political force to grow and develop. But CUG was not a real party—its was not committed to a political ideology and desire to service the common good, but wished to be in power simple for power's sake.

For much of CUG's reign, I was a businessman. During the 1999 Parliamentary elections, CUG's leadership asked many of us in the business community to join them in the campaign, which we did, hoping that in Parliament we would be able to address many of Georgia's challenges. In less than six months, we realized that CUG and its leadership did not care about moving Georgia forward. This is why 10 of us chose to leave CUG, and form our own faction in Parliament. Many of our friends thought it made little sense to challenge a political force with such extensive powers and influence. Some thought we would never succeed, while others, especially those who had been with us when we were building Georgia's few legitimate businesses, thought that our actions would endanger the entire entrepreneurship sector in Georgia.

But our early supporters stuck with us, while others joined us during the first year of our existence. Because of this very positive and strong response from the people, soon after forming a new faction, we decided to a new political party, which we hoped would be different from every other party that had ever existed in Georgia. We wanted to create a party based not around one leading political personality, as is the case with CUG, Revival, Labor, and others, but rather a political union around a reasoned political philosophy. As well, we wanted a party which would move outside of Tbilisi, open branches all across the country, and work directly with the individuals in every electoral district of Georgia.

Since we began our political struggle, we succeeded in two things. First, we destroyed the CUG, giving birth to an utterly new political landscape in Georgia by opening the sphere of public life. In this new landscape all of the various political opinions have a voice. Second, we overwhelmingly won our first elections. I know that the press only focused on what was happening in Tbilisi, but the interesting development really was in the regions, where the majority of Georgia's citizens live. There, no one could even compete with us because no one had cared about the regions before. As a result, our party won approximately 40 percent of the national vote, twice as much as its closest rival. The number of deputies that we elected to local councils as compared to other parties is also quite telling—the governing CUG won about 75 seats; Zurab Zhvania's team four, Saakashvili's team 25, Labor Party 125. Meanwhile, we won over 800, out of 2000.

CUG's death gave birth to a vibrant and free political life in Georgia, making it possible for people to believe in the possibility of a free and democratic transition of power which constitutionally must take place in Georgia over the next two and a half years. Our party aims to play a constructive role in this process, by being a strong and dominant voice in advocating for democracy and Human Rights. We are a center-right political party, dedicated to increasing political opportunity and individual freedom. We are committed to securing human right, especially freedom of religion and ensuring that the government prosecutes those who religious liberty. We are also committed to real free market reforms, and government policies which do not meddle in the life of the business community. However, the question of the primary importance is securing Georgia's liberal democracy and citizens rights because market freedom and individual well being will impossible without democracy. Stability cannot exist in an authoritarian state; free market cannot be successful without political freedom. The coming year will be critical in this process, when we must address three essential events:

First, we must begin with constitutional changes and reforms which are essential for strengthening of our democratic institutions. There are several areas of focus:

- First, establishment of real separation of powers and true checks and balances, giving the legislative and the judiciary enough powers to serve as real checks on the executive.
- Second, development of symmetric territorial federalism, giving each of the Georgian regions significant and equal political autonomy.
- Third, implementation of the real rule of law, where laws are supreme and where fundamental rights are protected through the courts. Particular areas of importance are laws governing the rights of religious minorities and laws governing the maximization of freedom in the business environment.

Second, in addition to constitutional changes, we must create an environment in which corruption will be dramatically reduced. This process must begin by instituting a real free market and real free trade to allow for the business community to live in the legal sphere. Today, the business community is challenged from two different ends, forcing it to live in a corrupt manner. On the one hand, it has to live under bad laws, which create far too many artificial barriers, and has to pay taxes that are far too high given Georgian realities. All of this creates a **demand** from the business community to exist in the corrupt, extralegal market. On the other hand, the business community is under a constant attack from corrupt officials—the police and security forces, tax police, and customs. These individuals are paid very little, often with months delay. Thus the government is in effect telling them, go take bribes. This is the old, Soviet-era model, one which Shevardnadze is very familiar with, and which he uses to stay in power. However, to end it, we must not only end the old mode, but we must create an environment in which there will not be a demand for special treatment on part of businesses by ensuring that the cost of legal operation is less than the cost of illegal operation.

Third, we must secure for fair, free and truly democratic elections for Parliament in November 2003. Georgian people face a very simple choice—either a pro-Western political force, which believes in democratic values in its soul and not simply because of convenience, will win the elections, **OR** a populist, pro-Russian force which will promise everyone everything without being able to deliver will win. The forthcoming general elections will decide the future of our country—they will decide whether Georgia will be on the path toward greater democratic consolidation or toward authoritarianism.

In preparation for these elections, we face a great danger in the face of the revival of Citizens Union of Georgia. As I mentioned, CUG's collapse was critical to the creation of new public sphere in Georgia, and the process of its revival is reminding us of the dangers this party used to pose to Georgia in the past. Led by State Minister Avtandil Jorbenadze, the CUG has been using the state budget, public property, and other governmental resources to build itself up. CUG's leadership is forcing individuals all across the country to join the party's ranks, threatening them with loss of jobs and arguing that government officials must be members of a so-called "state" party. The party is trying to discredit the Parliament, by having its leadership, especially the President, ignore the legislature's decisions and resolutions. It wishes to limit political freedom by stopping translation of Parliamentary sessions. Again under Jorbenadze's leadership, the governments has pursued a witch-hunt against business associated with opposition political parties and leaders. Finally, the party's leadership is standing by while the Georgian political process is criminalized. Criminals, some guilty of murdering political leaders, have been freed from jail. The Interior Minister, Koba Narchemashvili, whom many hoped would bring important changes to the Ministry, has often joined with criminals in corrupting the Ministry even further. People have the sense that the country is returning to 1992-3, when there was no protection and security in the streets, and when everyone feared to be outside.

The fact is that notwithstanding these difficulties, Georgian people must be given a chance to elect their government. The international community, but especially the United States, can do much to help promote free and fair elections. The Bush Administration must pressure President Shevardnadze to allow for democratic elections, and threaten to cut ties with him if he permits ballot stuffing or other electoral criminality. Many in the West still recognize Shevardnadze as a guarantor of political stability, and do not yet see a political force which will be able to defend democratic values in Georgia. Fortunately, there is a force which has power all across the country, which truly believes in democracy, and not just because it is a popular thing to do.

Much can be done inside Georgia in the area of helping ensure free elections as well. The role of the media and civil society in monitoring the electoral process and putting pressure on the government is vital.

At the same time, cooperation among different parties is also essential. Today, our party is participating in a dialogue with a number of parties, which NDI has played an important role in organizing, about developing a united front to formulate

strategies for securing of democracy in Georgia. We have serious political disagreements with a number of individuals and parties involved in this dialogue. We will nevertheless continue to be a part of these conversations, so long as parties that are part of this dialogue continue to truly stand for democracy—not simply out of window-dressing, but out of belief. However, we will participate in the forthcoming elections as a philosophically-based political force. We wish to present our vision of limited government, maximization of individual freedom and opportunity, unequivocal support for private property, and movement of power to local authorities to the citizens of the elections. Our intention is to win these elections, and we believe that our current standing with the people and our past performance gives us an opportunity to achieve this. However, much like in preparation for the elections, after November 2003 we will work with those parties that are committed to freedom, democracy and natural rights to govern the country. After the election this might require a coalition form of government, if we or another party are not able to gain a majority. However, the dialogue today is aimed at developing a united front for strategies to secure democracy, and not to establish a grand coalition.

In a liberal democracy, Madison once wrote, the power of the government must be “derived from the superior will of the people.” This is the fundamental principle of good and just government that we must install in Georgia. The people are the supreme authority and arbiter in a democracy. The forthcoming elections will give our government a chance to prove whether it stands true to this fundamental principle. I and my friends intend to do everything to ensure that it does, and I call on all of Georgia’s friends to play a role in this process as well since your support is of utmost importance.