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Internacionales

# CIS-Baltic States Program's Interview Series

## Dr. Alexander Rondeli

*Working paper # 45  
CIS-Baltic States Program*



## Interview Series #1

### Dr. Alexander RONDELI

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### **According to your analysis, what interests are behind Russian policy towards Georgia?**

Russia considers the South Caucasus the important geopolitical area for its survival as a great power. To regain its influence and presence in the region Moscow needs to regain control in the centrally located country of the South Caucasus- Georgia.

In 2008, the Russian leadership wanted to show its neighbors and the world that in the post-Soviet space, Russian rules would operate and nobody else's. Moscow concluded that the desirable was possible. By attacking Georgia, Russian leaders could solve some of their long-standing strategic goals; they would strengthen their military presence on the Southern slopes of the Caucasus. Georgia is a strategically key country for the Kremlin. If Kremlin does not retain control over Georgia, not only will it be unable to restore control over the South Caucasus, but it will also be difficult to claim a role of the major power in the region. Control over Georgia will allow Russia not only to control the entire South Caucasus, but also to feel more confident in the North Caucasus, where things are not going as Moscow would like. Control over Georgia will allow Kremlin to have an obstacle in the south that can hold back Turkey's influence on the former Soviet Turkic-speaking republics and peoples. Control over Georgia will make it possible to cut off energy- rich Azerbaijan and other Caspian basin states from the West by closing their access through the South Caucasus to the Black Sea. Control over Georgia will help Russia to retain its major military presence in the Black Sea. Control over Georgia will provide Russia with convenient contact with its only ally in the South Caucasus – Armenia – which due to historical circumstances is wary of Turkey and hostile towards Azerbaijan. And finally by controlling Georgia Moscow blocks possible penetration of European and Euro-Atlantic structures in the Caucasus. These reasons, for which Moscow believes that Georgia should be kept in Russia's military political orbit, are the powerful factors explaining Kremlin's efforts to put pressure on Georgia and accuse it of conducting an anti-Russian policy.



Controlling Georgia would be a first step to reestablishing Russia as an unchallenged hegemon in the entire region.

### **What role do the European Union and the United States play in the Georgian-Russian relations?**

The European Union and the United States play an outstanding role in shaping of the security dynamics in the South Caucasus and in defining Georgia's internal and foreign policy priorities and strategies.

Georgia, because it is multiethnic and multiconfessional society can become a viable state only if it becomes democracy and modern inclusive democratic nation. In that case interests of different ethnic and confessional groups could be accommodated and balanced. So, to become a genuine democracy means to become a viable state to Georgia. It is a strategic imperative and a matter of survival for this small rapidly developing post-soviet state.

To transform into genuine democratic state Georgia needs to be supported by Europe and the US and other democratic states. To have on its borders independent, democratic and western oriented Georgia, let alone the member of NATO and EU is not in the interests of Kremlin rulers. They want to regain control over Georgia and make it vassal, satellite entity with pro-Moscow regime in Tbilisi. It is why Georgia's desire to integrate in Euro-Atlantic and European structure is understandable. In doing so Georgia will gain security and guarantee its future in the family of democratic nations. Going back under Moscow's control would deprive Georgia of national perspectives and make this country one more autocratic dependent on Kremlin weak regime without future. Both EU and the US help Georgia to develop as democracy, support this new post-soviet state politically and economically. It irritates neoimperial Russia which looks at Georgia as its own backyard and the land which Russia needs to control even against the will of the people of Georgia.

It is why Georgia needs international support and the neutralization of Russian threat. Both EU and the US consider Russia an important country, one of the key international players, even their partner. Small Georgia cannot become the bone of contention between them and Russia. Western democracies are cautious in their approach to Georgian-Russian relations and try to push both countries to improve their relations. Is it why Russia, having enormous military supremacy in the Caucasus region manages to threaten and pressurize Georgia without fear that this small weak neighbor would be defended by other powerful states. Russia already used all possible actions against Georgia: instigated and supported separatism in Georgian provinces, economic blockade,



blackmail, even invaded Georgia in August 2008 and occupied its two historical provinces – Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Georgia is practically defenseless against its northern neighbor – polar bear with nuclear arms. Despite everything EU and the US continue to support and help Georgia in its democratic and economic transformation but do it in delicate way in order not to anger Russia too much.

### **What impacts do the Georgian-Russian relations have on the other South Caucasus countries? and on the bordering regions (North Caucasus, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, Black Sea)?**

Because of Russia's "divide and rule" policy in the South Caucasus and still quite powerful influence of ethnic nationalism on the security environment of the region, there are serious security problems in the South Caucasus, like Russian-Georgian confrontation and Karabakh conflict. These two main issues poison the atmosphere in the region and hamper its democratic and economic development. Without these serious problems the South Caucasus states could cooperate and in some areas even integrate, making the region stable and more attractive to foreign investments. The South Caucasus is an important geostrategic region, influencing international security and international trade, it is an important transportation and energy corridor between Europe and Asia, and its stability and development is in the interest of international community. The only country which is interested in the status quo and disorder in the South Caucasus is Russia, which wants to regain its control over the region and does not want to let the region develop without Russia's military and economic presence there. The future of Georgia and of the whole South Caucasus depends not only on Russia's behavior, but also on its relations with EU, the US, Turkey and Iran. Turkey and Iran are also regional superpowers and their influence on the region has grown significantly. They cooperate in some areas with Russia but their interests in the South Caucasus mainly contradict.

### **Will Russia's entry in the WTO affect the conflict in any way?**

The dispute between Russia and Georgia over Russia's joining the WTO attracted considerable attention of the international community. Georgia's position was to oblige Russia to behave according to the rules of the WTO and respect internationally recognized borders of Georgia. Georgia wanted to have customs control on Georgian-Russian border in the areas where it borders Russian-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia, which recognized the independence of these two territories, did not want to agree on Georgian demands.



After very long diplomatic battle conducted with the mediation of Switzerland, certain compromise was achieved – the trade on the abovementioned parts will be controlled internationally, by Swiss private company with Switzerland's control on it. Georgia considers the results of tense negotiations as its victory. These negotiations, in which Georgia was not left alone vis-à-vis powerful Russia, could be defined as a small step forward in Georgian-Russian relations. But in general, these relations are not good - both countries have no diplomatic relations with each other after 2008 war.

**Will the upcoming constitutional changes in Georgia have an impact on the conflict?**

Russia's goal is to regain control on Georgia. Moscow understands that new aggression would be politically too costly to Russia so it concentrates its efforts on the regime change in Tbilisi. These are parliamentary elections in 2012 and presidential elections in 2013 in Georgia. Moscow probably will try to influence these coming events and get rid of Saakashvili and his political team but it will not be easy – Georgian president still has serious support among the population of his country.

**According to your point of view, what foreign policy should Georgia follow in order to perform successfully in this scenario?**

Georgia's goal to integrate in NATO and EU remains the same. But bitter experience of Russian invasion and occupation of the 20 % of Georgia's territory by Russia has to make Georgia's foreign policy more subtle, more diplomatic. Georgia has to concentrate more on internal social and economic change, democratic development in order to be more attractive to foreign investors. Georgia has also to strengthen its relations with neighbors – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey as well as improve relations with Russia. Georgia needs political support and protection but who would be ready and capable to protect Georgia if Russia once more tries to swallow its small neighbor?

