

ANKARA : « Turkey Is Georgia's Strategic Partner ».

Ayhan Simsek

The New Anatolian / Istanbul ; 6/2/2006.

Energy security: We will be coordinating our efforts with Turkey, in order to get our energy supplies as diversified as possible. We'll work towards receiving gas from Iran.

Turkey-EU: We're closely following Turkey's EU process. Turkey's accession talks will clear the way for future prospect of Georgia joining the EU.

Armenia: We hope very much for better relations in the region, and we're ready to do what both Turkey and Armenia want to assist improving their relations. If our neighbors have better relations, this is better for us.

Rose Revolution: I don't think every country in the region and wider Mideast will choose revolutionary ways, but I have no doubt that all of them will go through democratic transition This will bring lasting peace and stability.

Visiting Prime Minister of Georgia Zurab Noghaideli, in an exclusive interview with TNA, said this weekend that together with its "strategic partner" Turkey, Georgia will develop policies to diversify energy sources, following shortages they faced from their energy suppliers.

Commenting on the unexplained explosions on natural gas pipelines that cut energy supplies from Russia, Noghaideli said, "We don't want to point to anybody. But these were very well-coordinated terrorist acts. We expect full investigation of the terrorist act, that will reveal not only who was involved but also who was behind it."

Russian officials have said "terrorists" were behind the blasts that damaged the pipes last Sunday. But observers in Georgia say it is widely believed that Russia is simply punishing the country for its pro-Western course and its desire to join NATO and rid itself of the Russian military presence.

The Georgian prime minister said that he does not agree with the analysis of developments in the region as a struggle between the so-called U.S.-Turkey-Georgia axis, against a Russia-Armenia-Iran axis, and added that Georgia is aiming to improve its relations with all its neighbors, despite some negative elements from time to time in relations with Russia.

Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli spoke with The New Anatolian, expressing his strategic vision of relations with Turkey. Here's what he had to tell us:

TNA: Your visit coincides with an energy crisis Georgia faced following unexplained explosions on a natural gas pipeline that cut off your energy supplies. Only weeks ago Ukraine, Europe and Turkey also faced similar problems. What are your future plans and suggestions to prevent possible crises in the future ?

NOGHAIDELI: Let me first tell you a few words about what was happened in Georgia. There were well-coordinated attacks to pipelines carrying natural gas to Georgia. We were immediately left without 30 percent of our energy supply. There is no country that can easily overcome

such a big problem. We have asked Russian authorities to at least condemn and give an explanation of that.

In general, this problem is very well recognized in the region and in the Europe. We should work towards diversification of our energy sources, and in fact Georgia has already started towards that. Turkey and Georgia are very important partners in this respect. The Sahdeniz natural gas pipeline from Azerbaijan will be connected to the Baku-Ceyhan (pipeline), this is a very important project in that respect. We're also working with some other projects as well. We're coordinating our efforts with Turkey, in order to get our energy supplies as diversified as possible.

TNA: There were claims that Russia was behind those explosions. Do you agree?

NOGHAIDELI: We don't want to point to anybody. But it raises a lot of questions. Because these were very well-coordinated terrorist acts ...

350 kilometers away from each other ... It's very clear that this could not be done by very ordinary terrorists ... we should get an explanation from Russian authorities. We expect a full investigation of this terrorist act, that will reveal not only who was involved but also who was behind it.

TNA: You've characterized the Turkey-Georgia cooperation as a strategic partnership. Can you tell us about your meeting in Turkey -- on which issues did you focus, other than the energy?

NOGHAIDELI: The main issues that we discussed during my visit this time were mainly ways to strengthen our economic ties. But our close relations aren't limited to that. As I mentioned before Turkey is a strategic partner for Georgia. We have very important bilateral military cooperation, it is very important for Georgia, and we are thankful to Turkish authorities for assistance to improve our military capacity. We have also have important cooperation on NATO issue. We're enjoying strong support from Turkey.

I have to add that we're closely following Turkey's EU process. For Georgia first of all Turkish accession talks and Turkey's EU integration in a way will clear the way to follow the same path.. But it is also important to the wider Middle East region. The fact that Turkey's accession talks have started, the fact that the EU will no longer be a Christian-only club, are very important for the countries of the wider Middle East to move towards democratic transition, to have closer ties with the EU.

Currently in our relations with Turkey we're concentrating on economic and trade ties, and discussing the possibility of free trade agreement between our countries. This may face problems because Turkey is part of the EU Customs Union. But we're also discussing now preferential treatment for our goods on several goods. We're discussing and aiming to finalize an agreement soon on preventing double taxation which will boost Turkish investment in Georgia. In the next three years we aim to reach the level of \$3 billion in our trade. We're looking for ways to get Turkish investments in Georgian energy, telecom and banking sectors and to invite the Turkish construction sector. I'm totally glad and satisfied with my visit.

TNA: Close relations with Turkey and Georgia and its benefits for the two countries seems to offer a good example for cooperation in the region. But your two neighbors Turkey and Armenia are still unable to put aside their disputes and normalize their relations. What do

you think about that?

NOGHAIDELI: We hope very much for better relations in the region, and we're ready to do what both Turkey and Armenia want of us to assist for improve their relations. As Georgia we are not benefiting from problems that countries have in their relations with some other countries. Our approach is different. If our neighbors have better relations, this is better for us.

TNA: Georgian officials have recently asked EU to be more active on the South Ossetia conflict. Can you give us some detail about that?

Can there be progress soon in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the issue?

NOGHAIDELI: Let me explain that. As you know we have prepared a South Ossetia Resolution Peace Plan. This was also supported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), this is in no longer merely a Georgian plan. In fact Russia also backed this plan and it became an OSCE plan. Now we want this to be implemented, it wasn't prepared to just leave it on the shelf.

I think there are serious prospects to solve the South Ossetia conflict through peaceful ways, it is possible in the nearest future, despite the fact that Russia and South Ossetia's de facto leaders are currently delaying the process. Georgia wants to accelerate this process through the maximum extent it is possible. At this stage we're looking forward to the EU and U.S. actively participating in the negotiation frameworks, this is part of the plan.

TNA: Turkey in the past took an active role contributing to a peaceful solution to the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts. Do you expect such a new initiative from Ankara?

NOGHAIDELI: For us, I think that there are a lot of things Turkey could do and is already doing to promote negotiations and peace plan implementation. Turkey is strongly supporting Georgia's territorial integrity.

TNA: Georgia's Rose Revolution started a wave of new movements in the region, also influencing the debates on the Greater Middle East initiative. Do you think your experience can be an example for other countries in the region and wider Middle East?

NOGHAIDELI: Georgia's rose revolution and the Georgian example is important for the region and wider Middle East, despite Georgia's small size and population. People here in this region thought 15 years ago that democracy is something for Germans, Norwegians and Austrians but not for Georgians, Jordanians and so on. But then people realized that this is also possible for Georgians, Ukrainians and others.

And I think that the Rose Revolution encouraged others not necessarily for a revolution but democratic transformation. I don't think that every country in the region will choose revolutionary ways, but I have no doubt that all of them will go through democratic transition here in this region and the wider Middle East. And democratic transition will bring long-lasting peace and stability in the region.

TNA: Some observers view current developments in the region as a struggle between the so-called U.S.-Turkey-Georgia axis, against the Russia-Armenia-Iran axis. Do you agree with that? And how do you view Iran's nuclear program?

NOGHAIDELI: I don't really agree with this understanding of axes. The more we speak with these terms, the more problematic the issues will become. We work towards good relations with all our neighbors, we have very good relations with Armenia, but unfortunately from time to time we have some negative elements in our relations with Russia.

Turkey and the U.S. are strategic partners for us. I do not agree with that (analysis).

As far as our relations with Iran are concerned, particularly on emergency gas supply to Georgia, we look forward to diversifying our energy supply ... alternatives, especially gas supply alternatives ... We have been able successfully to complete negotiations for emergency gas supply and we're already working to get also a regular gas supply.

In terms of Iran's nuclear program, we hope that this issue is resolved through peaceful means to the mutual interest of the countries.
