
Atlantic Eye : Tbilisi's European yearnings

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LONDON, April 17 (UPI) -- Arriving in Tbilisi's modern airport still has some feel of arriving behind the Iron Curtain. The drive to the British ambassador's residence reminded me of driving in Azerbaijan -- large monuments line the wide boulevard into Georgia's capital. There the world begins to look different.

Georgia lies in the Caucasus, but there is little of the region in this capital city of 1.4 million. The architecture ranges from grand Russian to distinctly European -- with a hint of something colonial that reminded me of Singapore or Sydney. One immediately notices the vast differences in wealth. The abundance of sport utility vehicles seems a bit odd. There is definitely an air of macho, of Latin America, of testosterone.

A few weeks ago I traveled with a delegation to the Prague Society and Global Panel's 3rd Black Sea Initiative. Gen. Dieter Stockmann, the former NATO deputy commander, joined along with former Romanian Defense Minister Gheorghe Tinca, former Slovak Prime Minister Jan Carnogursky, Morocco's Hassan Abouyoub, the king's chief foreign policy adviser; and Yossef Bodansky, a senior adviser to the U.S. Congress. Ambassador Denis Keefe, an old friend from the Cold War days and now her majesty's man in Georgia, had agreed to host this session and a public policy dinner with Minister Temur Iakobashvilli, the new minister for reintegration. Among the guests of this off-the-record session were German Ambassador Patricia Flur, Turkish Ambassador Ertan Tezgor, the young member of Parliament Giorgi Bokeria, a close adviser to President Mikhail Saakashvili and businessmen David Lee and Anthony Turner.

Despite its somewhat underwhelming and strange sounding name, the Georgian Ministry for Reintegration is one of the key ministerial positions in the Georgian Republic. Under the minister's jurisdiction fall the prickly issues of the breakaway Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. No countries recognize either. The Russians have "protective" troops in both and have threatened to recognize both in retaliation for the recognition of Kosovo. As it turns out, Iakobashvilli has a brilliant mind, a no-BS style and a think-out-of-the-box spirit. Just after dinner, he rushed to yet another crisis in this area, which lies on the territory of Georgia.

The next day at the 3rd BSI Session hosted at the British Embassy, Barbara Day, a fellow Brit and senior fellow of the Prague Society, was present as were representatives of NGOs, the private sector, some diplomats and the delegation for an intense look at Black Sea issues. The discussion focused mostly on energy security and how Georgia might better put forth its interest in the Black Sea region. As a supporter of the country, I regret that it has not -- like Romania -- used the Black Sea area to better its political and economic advantage.

Turkey and Russia dominate the Black Sea agenda, which makes sense given their vast borders with the sea. But all of the countries in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation area (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine directly on the Black Sea, and Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and Moldova in the area) would benefit from a unified economic area. I envision it to be something akin to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Georgia has a somewhat unique role between Russian and Islam. But what becomes very clear very quickly is that the Georgians see themselves as Europeans.

There is a new closeness to the United States, and all ATMs offer dollars and lari, but culturally, educationally, ethnically and spiritually the Georgians have karma with Europe.

A big concern is Russia.

As one ranking guest noted, "Russia is creating facts on the ground -- in energy and security, gaining power -- while Europe is busy debating its role and the United States is tied-up, incapable of extracting itself from Iraq."

Georgia's NATO aspirations make Russia edgy. A Russian official recently told me that Russia would have little problem with Georgia joining the European Union.

At the NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, just a few weeks ago, neither Ukraine nor Georgia was given a Membership Action Plan. It is the first step to NATO membership. Both were also not given much encouragement behind the scenes for EU membership. This I do not understand.

If the Europeans understood their often proclaimed and vaunted soft power, they would pave the way for Ukraine and Georgia to join the EU. It is an unfortunate axiom that the EU more often than not moves at the pace of a dinosaur.

I respect Europe, but for God's sake, wake up and smell the daisies.

The NATO statutes should be changed to reflect today. References to "standing against the Warsaw Pact" and "first nuclear-strike use" should be expunged.

NATO is the most successful international body of all time. But it must reorient itself to a new enemy. Any security and economic paradigm with Georgia should not treat the Russians as second cousins - they are not. While unpopular with many new economies and former Soviet satellites, Russia should be considered a serious and reliable partner.

I am a child of the Cold War. I fought communism. I stood against Russia as a soldier. I have seethed at Russia -- especially at its current President Vladimir Putin. I get tired of Russia's winging and posturing.

I strongly support Georgia and Ukraine in NATO and the European Union -- Turkey as well.

But along the way, we really should find a way to stop making sport of purposely pissing off the Russians.
