

Wednesday, November 19, 2008

Iakobashvili on the Current State of the Conflict

I attended State Minister Teimuraz Iakobashvili's talk held at the Institute for European Studies at TSU on November 14. Overall, the talk was the first talk in Georgia I have seen where the majority of people who attended were Georgian students. Despite the fact that the audience was overwhelmingly Georgian, Minister Iakobashvili spoke entirely in English. Additionally, the Minister was very generous with his time and engaged in an extensive Q&A session with students who also asked questions only in English

Iakobashvili's main points (in note format) are as follows

1. Russia is in a state of decay. This decay will take time, but things are bad in Russia. They lost political and economic ground and the war revealed Russia's military weakness. According to Iakobashvili.

From a military perspective

- Over 2,000 Russian soldiers were killed
- The 60 number quotes by Russians were only from Yamadayev's troops
- Georgia destroyed Khrulyev's column included 30/35 armored vehicles each carrying at least 8 people for a minimum of 240 dead from this column alone
- Russia suffered major hardware losses including: 17 airplane, 1 strategic bomber, 3 helicopters
- Russian soldiers are starving in Akhgori and have resorted to raiding local Ossetians

From an economic perspective

- Gas prices have led to major budget shortfalls in Russia
- Europe will not ultimately be reliant on Russian gas
- No liquefied natural gas terminal and no ports for them in Russia
- China can get gas from Central Asia

From a political perspective

- Demographic tides are promoting separatism
- Only Moscow, St. Petersburg and Muslim dominated parts of Russia are growing. Muslim areas in Russia are demonstrating more ethnic homogeneity and anti-Russian sentiment
- High birth rates in Muslim Russia are leading to more unemployment and dissatisfaction
- 15% of Russian conscripts from the North Caucasus—many refusing to eat pork and stationed in Siberia
- Ingushetia has all signs of civil war
- Ossetians and particularly Abkhaz are angry at Russia
- Russia has upset Abkhaz political dominance by either 1) Installing a Russian second in command Or 2) Directly taking over certain operations

2. Russia is angry now and was angry before and this is particularly dangerous for Georgia in the coming winter months

Russia was angry before because Georgia's strategy of "soft power was working"

- Sanakoyev and Upper Kodori were successes
- "Boney M, swimming pools and cinemas" were a success

Russia is angry now because of all the bad results of the war

- This makes Russia very dangerous in the short term

3. Georgia's strategy going forward – "Crisis gives you opportunity"

Build bridges to Abkhaz and Ossetians

- Georgia has a mission to save Abkhaz and Ossetians from Russian domination

Georgia is not a member of NATO and doesn't have the "goddamn plan" MAP

- But MAP was only created recently under specific circumstances and should not be for Georgia
- A special GAP or specific technical goals should be given to Georgia – it should be a political decision
- Better than NATO, however, would be two American brigades in Georgia
- Georgia should "fight when the fight makes sense" – Georgia should not argue with the EU resuming talks with Russia – but should seek to influence the process

Q & A and Other issues

Q: Why didn't the Georgian Government heed the European Commission's recommendations about Upper Kodori and South Ossetia?

A: The EU is a "status quo" organization. "We would have to abandon our people" if Georgia listened to them.

Q: What about Georgia and Georgia's future image and what about Swiss inquiry?

A: Russia saw they were getting beat in the press. Iakobashvili has a list of PR agencies Russia has engaged in. Russia allowed the NYT to swallow a story from a guy who no longer works for the OSCE. Russia is also influencing press freedom abroad. Berlusconi has censored debate in Italy.

Georgia should work hard to build relations with Obama's foreign policy team

As a result of the war, the level of awareness about Georgia has significantly increased.

Q: Does government have scenarios, even worse case scenarios?

A: Yes. The government learns quickly. Reservist system needs to change. The war showed MANAGEMENT problems. The reservists were not the problem. The war showed us “who is worth what”

Q: What about the Armenians in Abkhazia. Who do they support?

A: They leave the politics to the Abkhaz, though the status quo has been good to them, since they generally live in the north of Abkhazia. 30 or 31 out of 35 members of Abkhaz parliament are ethnic Abkhaz. This is called “apartheid.”

Q: What about the EU Monitors?

A: It would be better if they were armed and in Tskhinvali, But they are much better than the OSCE or UN, because they are free from Russian influence. UN cannot help solve the problem.

Q: What about the Geneva negotiations?

A: Georgia expects 3 countries (US, Russia, Georgia) and three int’l organizations (EU, UN, OSCE). They will not accept SO or Abkhazia. Russia can have whatever technical experts they want on their team. But there should be parity, so if Kokoity is attending, so should Sanakoyev.

Q What is with the UN?

A: UNOMIG was asked to leave Kodori. To justify this, they issued a “ridiculous report.” UN will not play a significant role politically because of Russia, but they have been very helpful on the humanitarian front.