

“IF TURKISH-ARMENIAN BORDER REOPENS, GEORGIA WILL BECOME LESS IMPORTANT”

Interview with Dr. Hans Gutbrod* and Koba Turmanidze**
Caucasus Research Resource Centers, Tbilisi, Georgia

Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Interview Editor of CRIA



Dr. Hans Gutbrod.
Source: Russiatoday.ru

CRIA: *Over the last ten years that you have been living and working in Georgia, what are some changes that strike you the most?*

Gutbrod: I think it would be fair to say that when I came here in 1999, there was trouble in every single way. Georgia and its people were running up against massive and huge challenges. Now, one of the things that have changed, clearly, is that they have narrowed the challenges down. Of course, the country is still facing important, critical challenges, such as, in the view of its own citizens according to our surveys, challenges like territorial integrity, unemployment, poverty, and that even when people have jobs, they are not getting paid very well, and healthcare. But where they face these large challenges, now they have moved into a field of political feasibility. Many of those things can now be addressed. There is a “state,” and in 1999 we just were not sure whether Georgia constituted a state at all. And I do not think that is something people doubt now. So, huge progress, and, of course, many challenges remain, including that of completing democratization...



Koba Turmanidze.
Source: Web.ceu.hu

Turmanidze: That is a good description, but to add to questioning whether Georgia was a state in 1999, especially as people were coming with ideas of what a state should look like, for those who lived through the 1990s, the end of the decade was much better than they could ever imagine... because the beginning of the decade was that bad—it was chaos. Sometimes we would joke that Shevardnadze was Tbilisi’s mayor, not president of the country, because his power did not extend beyond Tbilisi. But the important thing was that, although state

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structures existed in physical form, they functioned like private institutions: people in state structures were acting like they were running private businesses, and, now, that is hardly possible to do. That is the biggest difference—that there is a differentiation between the state and private institutions. The state does what it does—whether just or not—and the private sector is totally different.

CRIA: *How important is the work the Caucasus Research Resource Centers does, in terms of allowing Georgians to speak for themselves on national issues? How do we get an angle from this that goes beyond what outside commentators purport?*

Gutbrod: I think this is really where we see the role of quality opinion research. And that is something that the CRRC is hoping to provide in that context: to give a voice to what people think, to bring “the main voice” into the debate, not just elite views or surface impressions that shape judgment. There is a narrow technical way of looking at survey work and opinion research, but I think there is also a broader role, one that has been articulated by Richard Rose that says “counting people makes them count.” It is a way of going beyond elections and giving a voice to what people would like to have, what they need, and what they would like to see. In many Western countries people do not really think about that. Because they are used to functioning institutions, which include opinion research and established statistical departments, they do not think of it as a really critical transmission mechanism. It is that type of mechanism that we want to contribute to, so that we have a much more informed conversation about what is going on.

CRIA: *Can you summarize Georgia’s desire for NATO membership, i.e. what Georgians see as the pros and cons in this situation?*

Gutbrod: I think, generally, for Georgians, NATO membership means one big thing: security—and sleeping soundly at night, so to speak, or not having to worry about an intrusion that could change everything. To give just one example, imagine what this means for business people who are figuring out whether to invest and thereby employ people. So the desire for security is very reasonable and something that is very understandable.

We looked into the question whether Georgians might be willing to make trade-offs, so to speak, reduce the drive towards integration with Euro-Atlantic structures—to put it broadly—in exchange for concessions granted by Russia. The overwhelming view that Georgians communicated was that no such concessions were on the table. So, to the extent that anybody in Russia would have any interest in contemplating that option, they would need to do a lot of work to convince that there is a feasible option on the table in the first place and, secondly, that it is an attractive option that would be worth considering. Right now that is not appearing in the discourse. So, as a discussion, it is relegated to a relatively small elite circle, and merely speculative.

CRIA: *So, what can Georgia do to increase its chances of membership? Or will most of the initiative have to be taken by external actors?*

Turmanidze: Unfortunately, it is not totally up to us. But what we can do is to cancel out the reasons that are given by those against Georgia’s membership. Of course, there are these reasons, and they are objective and go beyond the fact that Russia does

not want it: such reasons as our level of democracy, democratic elections, participation of different groups in power—things that are declared to be preconditions for NATO membership. The other thing is: how ready is the Georgian army, which performed miserably in August 2008. How ready is it to be part of something really powerful and has high standards? And, of course, in those areas we have a lot of problems...

CRIA: *In a recent CRRC survey, Georgians ranked relations with Russia as the third most important issue facing the country, with twice as many people choosing this option over the issue of EU membership. How can Georgia's drive toward the West be reconciled with this desire for better a better relationship with Russia?*

Gutbrod: Well, obviously, Georgians want good relationships in all directions, and the reason why that figures prominently in the surveys is because, of course, it is one of the things that is most in need of fixing. And it relates directly to people's livelihood; for example, Russia is a potentially big export market - from mineral water and wine to other agricultural products. In that way, people want complimentary relations. They do not want one thing to come at the expense of another. With regard to European institutions, it is obvious how these things can be complimentary. As for NATO, there is of course the remaining tension between choosing NATO versus a closer relationship with Russia. Conversely, it is also understandable that many Georgians would have the hope that they can maintain good relationships while making their own choices about their security arrangements, and still maintain a good relationship in terms of trade, cultural exchange, and many of the things that Georgians and Russians have shared over time.

Turmanidze: Yes, it is very interesting how these numbers confirm our observations and feelings. Although we really do have strong negative feelings about Russia as a state and neighbor, these feelings never transferred to Russian citizens. Even in 1992–93, when we knew that Russia was fighting against us in South Ossetia and Abkhazia - and then we had a bigger Russian population than we have now - I seriously thought that, because people were so nationalistic, they might attack ethnic Russians. But nothing like that happened. So it is not like the survey results are coincidental: it does confirm what goes on in everyday life between citizens, where cultural exchanges do not consider the animosity present in state relations.

CRIA: *Finally, how does an open Turkish–Armenian border affect the region as a whole? Do you see any especially important implications in this context?*

Gutbrod: If the border indeed opens, if those protocols are ratified, it will mark a sizeable change. From our point of view, we can talk about how this is going to affect a lot of people throughout the Caucasus. I think in some key ways, on many of the key geostrategic issues, there was a sense that the Caucasus did not just have frozen conflicts: all of it was “frozen,” and that it had gotten stuck. The word that is being used over and over again in Armenia in reference to what a border opening would mean is “oxygen.” And so I think, really, in a very literal way it would be a deep breath of fresh air and, hopefully, something that would lead to and precipitate other changes—that many things that would have seemed inconceivable in the last few years would become possible.

Turmanidze: Well, if the border opens, there is another thing that will happen for Georgia: we will become less important. I consider this in terms of a zero-sum game. And many citizens in each of these three countries in the South Caucasus can live, or have lived, for centuries without even knowing what is going on in their neighboring country. Someone wins and someone loses, and we will be losers if the border opens. I always joke that we cannot become a “state” because others, our neighbors like Iran and Russia, are not reliable partners. So I do not look at it as something exciting—although, of course, who would be against opening closed borders—but I care more about the citizens of this country. And for our citizens, wealth will decrease, importance will decrease; so, overall, we will be an even less important geopolitical player than we are now.