

Georgia Rejects EUSSR: Pro-Neutralist Party Leader Speaks | Amb. Konstatin Zghenti

Georgia has a new pro-neutrality party. I'm sitting down with one of its founding members, the former Georgian Ambassador, Konstatin Zhgenti, to talk about the new movement for a neutral and sovereign Georgia that wants to be friends to all, and foe to no one. Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction & Biography 00:06:53 Neutrality & Relations with Russia 00:13:08 Public Opinion on the EU 00:16:09 Western Perceptions & Propaganda 00:22:33 Georgia as a Bridge 00:25:34 Conflict Resolution & The Ukraine Comparison 00:32:40 NATO Instability & Coercive Diplomacy 00:38:04 Election Goals & Domestic Policy

#Pascal

Hello everybody, and welcome back to Neutrality Studies. Today I have the great honor and privilege of being joined by a Georgian colleague, Konstatin Zghenti, who is actually one of the founding members of a new political party in Georgia—and I mean the country of Georgia in the Caucasus, not the state in the United States. Konstatin co-founded United Neutral Georgia, the first party in Georgia that officially advocates for the neutrality of the state. And Konstatin is here to tell us more about it. Konstatin, welcome.

#Konstatin Zghenti

Thank you for inviting me.

#Pascal

Could you maybe start by telling us a little bit about yourself? What's your background, where do you come from, and why did you co-found this neutrality party?

#Konstatin Zghenti

As for my career, you know, by education I'm a historian and orientalist from the University of Tbilisi, Georgia, Faculty of Oriental Studies. From the first days of regaining our independence, I was in Georgian diplomacy. I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1989, even several months before our first independent elections. I worked there for 33 years, holding quite a lot of positions. My last post

was director of the Political Directorate. Before that, I was deputy ambassador in Italy, and then ambassador in five countries—Austria, Hungary, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Finally, I retired last year after serving as ambassador of Georgia in Kuwait. And that's it. Now I'm retired, and as you mentioned, one of the supporters and founders of our party, United Neutral Georgia. And why? I want to explain that.

You know, everyone who's interested in politics understands that for a country's successful development—economic, political, all kinds of development—the first thing a country needs is security. And especially a country like Georgia, in such a location, such a small country without strong military, political, or economic capabilities. But, you know, now, especially in the last four or five years—maybe a bit more, but especially in this period—considering the global changes in the world, in our region, and in nearby regions, it's clear that no political or military-political organization, like NATO or the European Union, can give us that security.

We were always looking for a security umbrella for small Georgia. Our government, and the ones before it, believed that NATO was the kind of organization that could give us this security umbrella. But now everyone hears and knows what's going on in NATO, and even some of its own members openly say that NATO is not going to provide any kind of security umbrella to countries like Georgia. And on the other side, what's happening in the European Union... I can't really say that the European Union is going to do something like that in the end.

But the thing is, inside the European Union, the countries are so deeply divided. And openly, the leaders of some EU member states are saying this. You know, our main reason for wanting EU membership was, first of all, from the point of view of a security umbrella. The European Union is not a military-political organization like NATO, but we also saw membership as a way to get some guarantees for our successful and peaceful development. And it seems that there's no political body, no country, no superstate, or any nearby power that can give us those security guarantees for our development.

And we think that neutrality—if we announce it, and not only announce it but prove it together with other countries, neighboring countries, leading countries in the region, and global powers—will show that we're not going to be a member of any political or military-political entity. You know, in our region, they've always been, I don't want to say fighting, but competing for presence and influence—in the South Caucasus and the wider region as well. So we think that if we follow neutrality and explain why we want it, it will be the most suitable path for our secure, economic, political, and democratic development, and so on. So that's it, briefly.

#Pascal

I congratulate you on that, because, you know, in the quest to create NATO as a deterrent to enemies, the people who think about deterrence tend to forget that if you only have friends, you don't need deterrence. And the neutrality strategy kind of caters to that idea: let's make friends with

everybody and enemies with no one, thereby being safe simply by being on good terms with everyone. Now, the difficulty is, of course, that the international environment is not just made up of friends. And Georgia, in fact, at the moment, doesn't have diplomatic relations with Russia because they're occupying two of your regions. However, your party seems to argue that there still is a way to be neutral and to approach this neutrally. Could you maybe give me a little bit of your thinking on that approach?

#Konstatin Zghenti

You know, you talked about Russia. Of course, we heard that Russia's first demand regarding Ukraine was for Ukraine to be neutral. Earlier, the Ukrainian government was thinking about this and talking a bit with Russia about it. I'm not going to go deeply into the Minsk Agreement and all that, but from the Russian side, the main idea was that Ukraine must be neutral. This is the so-called "near abroad," which many people here don't really like as a term—but we are part of that near abroad of Russia, whether we like it or not. And of course, such a superpower as Russia still is—maybe some think it's a declining superpower, others think it's not—but the fact is, they remain one of the leading powers, along with the United States and China.

And in the situation of a multipolar world, when the leading powers are, you know, looking for ways to talk with each other, to make agreements, and to decide on the contours of the new international architecture—global and also regional—because, you know, what happens globally always reflects on Georgia and the South Caucasus. And what goes on in Ukraine is also part of our so-called near abroad. So, this is our idea of being neutral. It helps us explain, not only to the superpowers, that we're not going to be a member of one team or another—I mean, the kinds of organizations where they are the leaders and sometimes confront each other in different regions of the world.

We want the South Caucasus to be a region of cooperation, not, you know, a place of pressure or, you know, fighting for more rights here or over what to do. Of course, we know that Russia is thinking—like the United States is thinking—according to the Monroe Doctrine, which says that America is their backyard. Russia is also thinking that way, and we don't like it. I'm repeating myself, but practically, it's the near abroad of Russia, and Russia wants to have some influence in this region. But when you're going to be a member of NATO or such an organization that, you know, openly confronts Russia, then of course your security possibilities are not as high as if we... yeah, yeah, I think it's clear.

And because of this, if Russia hears that Georgia is going to be a neutral country, it will help us reach our main goal peacefully—to rebuild our territorial integrity and to begin the kind of movement and negotiations with Russia, with the Abkhazians, with the so-called South Ossetia. It gives us more possibilities than being a NATO member, for example. And as for the European Union—okay, still our government is saying that their goal is the European Union. But what kind of European Union?

Everyone sees this new kind of flag of the European Union, with their leaders and the words "European Soviet Union" written there. So if the European Union is going this way, to become a European Soviet Union, I think there's no place in such a union for a country like Georgia. So...

#Pascal

I mean, it's just very ironic that, you know, at the moment the European Union's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, was born—just like you—a Soviet citizen, right? And apparently, she has brought a couple of those ideas and ideals into that new union. So, out of one union into another. Maybe we don't need to talk about it that much, but the fact is that for Georgia it's important to have some form of working relationship with Russia, some form of working relationship with the EU, some form of working relationship with others, right? So why are you forming a new party to do that? And how is the general mood in Georgia when it comes to this neutrality issue—beyond just your circle of people, but in the broader population?

#Konstatin Zghenti

You know, a lot of people who are interested in Georgian politics, and politics in our region—especially in Georgia—they know that some years ago, maybe ten years ago or so, most of the population of Georgia, and they showed this during the elections, wanted to be a member of the European Union. More than 80 percent. But we think—or rather, we're sure—that the situation has changed a lot, especially over the last four or five years, so those figures are no longer accurate, you know.

That's why our party is demanding that we ask the people one more time—to have a plebiscite, or something like that—to ask whether so many people in Georgia still want to be members of the European Union. And we're sure the figures will not be, you know, in favor of those who want to be members of that kind of European Union. But the other point is that, from my point of view—and I think the other leaders of our party will agree with me—the quick changes in the European Union are something we cannot wait for. Because the so-called "old Europe," I mean Germany and France, and now Great Britain is not a member of the EU, but still one of the most important countries in Europe.

Changes there are very difficult to expect in the way that, for example, in Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, or even Poland. Old Europe is old Europe, and quick changes there, from my point of view and my colleagues', we cannot expect so soon. So we are a little bit, you know, in a situation where we have to choose what to do. And we think that neutrality is one of the possibilities, you know, for a country like Georgia—to reach these goals I mentioned before: our peaceful, successful development—economic, political, and democratic.

#Pascal

I mean, I completely agree with you. And just let me make this completely transparent: I think your analysis—I agree with your analysis, and I agree with the strategy. The problem most likely is not that Russia wouldn't like this, but that we already have voices in Europe who strongly condemn this approach. I'm just looking at a page from the Jamestown Foundation, jamestown.org, and there's quite a bit of negative publicity about you.

One is saying, you know, Georgian Dream—and that's another party, not your party, that's the government party—Georgian Dream publicly defends Georgian sovereignty while making concessions aligned with Russian demands, advancing a neutrality narrative that weakens Euro-Atlantic integration, normalizes Moscow's influence, and so on. So the people on the EU side and on the NATO side interpret Georgian neutrality as hostile. And that's also just a fact. We can't change that. It's a stupid way of looking at it, but that's how they see it. How do you think Georgia and your party can communicate with the Europeans to calm them down, one way or another?

#Konstadin Zghenti

You know, now it's obvious that even inside the European Union, many are talking about the influence of leftist liberals, liberal globalists, and mainly the NGOs financed by them in different countries. They try to show that the situation in this or that country is quite different from what it really is. In a country like Georgia, for sure—because, you know, not only USAID but also some other NGOs financed from abroad—they were doing this kind of work here in Georgia. They were trying to show, not to the Georgian population but to audiences outside, especially in Europe and some other countries, that the Georgian government is doing awful things, that they're working with the Russians, avoiding sanctions, and so on.

No, you know, we think that—by the way, throughout all of Georgia's history, the country was successful as an independent state when its leaders, heads, or even kings followed pragmatic politics—pragmatic politics with their neighbors, with their friends, with the big, powerful countries or states that were fighting for influence in our region and in our country. During those periods, when we tried to do this—Georgia being a small country—we had neither historically, nor now, the kind of military or political capacity, or other means, to defend ourselves and to show strength. But we have diplomacy.

We didn't have diplomacy. We didn't have relations with our neighbors—first of all, the inner circle, then the more distant neighbors in our region, and then the superpowers. At that time, it was always Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran fighting for our territory and influence in the region. Later, it was the Soviet Union and the West, and we were part of the Soviet Union. And as you correctly said, I'm a Soviet-born and Soviet-educated man who lived through that era. The Soviet Union, like Kayakalas—by the way, as you mentioned—and some others in the former Baltic republics, you know, those who are now teaching us while forgetting where they came from.

#Pascal

I'm sorry, it's just—it's so ironic to me that the people from the Baltic states, who said, "We fought for our liberty from the Union," are now telling others who got their liberty from the same Union, "You have to join the new Union. Join the Union, or else." It shows that there's no real understanding of what's happening around some people.

#Konstatin Zghenti

I agree with you, but sometimes it's not just ironic—it's actually funny, you know, to listen to what they're saying. Because we are trying, and especially our government, by the way, they are trying to follow a pragmatic policy. And while Georgia is playing more and more the role of a corridor country—from east to west, from Asia to Europe, as we always have—and with our new, even strategic, relations with China, the goods coming from China through Central Asia, through Georgia and Azerbaijan, then to Europe, are increasing every year. This route is developing constantly, and we'll try to continue this pragmatic policy toward all our neighbors, the countries of the East, and our relationship with Europe, while playing our role in all of this. By the way, this Chinese initiative of "One Way, One Path"...

#Pascal

One Belt, One Road.

#Konstatin Zghenti

One Belt, One Road, which is very important for us, because more and more goods are coming from China through Central Asia and through Georgia to Europe. We're going to continue this. Our neutrality and our peaceful, pragmatic policy will help us be successful in it.

#Pascal

I find that a good idea. And, you know, in a way, it seems to me that the question of geopolitics today is not so much one between left and right, or ideology. It's more between those who aim to create walls—transforming Georgia into a wall, for instance—and those who say, no, we need to be a bridge. We need to connect, and we need to connect all sides. So the neutrality approach is the one that creates a bridge. The other one creates a front, right, against the enemy. So, can you maybe elaborate a little on how you think Georgia can be, and historically was, a bridge?

#Konstatin Zghenti

You know, it's very strange. The countries that once wanted to destroy the wall—the Berlin Wall—and to remove barriers in Europe and promote contact, are now, as you said, trying to build a new wall in Georgia. It's unbelievable to think that those same countries, European countries, are now talking more about continuing the war rather than peace in Europe, mainly in Ukraine. It's very

strange, you know, because if you want a policy of unity and cooperation between West and East, North and South, between the superpowers and the regional countries, then building walls is, to put it very calmly, strange. It's strange, and honestly, I can't understand it.

#Pascal

It goes hand in hand, you know, with this strategic idea of containment: "Let's contain Russia, let's contain China." If you want to contain, you need to build walls, right? And that's the approach of the people who want this forceful policy. Georgia now says, and your party says, "No, we're not going to play along with that. We want to connect, not fence off." Of course.

#Konstatin Zghenti

The main idea, as I already told you, is to make our region—and the center of it, Georgia—a place of cooperation. Not, you know, a place of conflict or a clash of interests or civilizations. No. A place of cooperation, a place that plays the role of a bridge and a corridor. Peaceful.

#Pascal

There are some people who argue, "But Georgia was already invaded by Russia. It already had a war with Russia, and it's currently being occupied—parts of it are still occupied by Russia. How do you think a neutrality policy can help resolve that conflict?"

#Konstatin Zghenti

Because, first of all, we cannot do this by force. It's impossible. Georgia is not the kind of country that can regain its territorial integrity and sovereignty through force. That's a fact. And, you know, a fact in real politics is very difficult to overcome. Yes, yes, in every kind of politics—especially in real politics. I'm a strong follower of real politics, by the way, since the time I began studying international and foreign relations. So, if not by force, then what is the way? Of course, the way is a peaceful one—through negotiations, through developing contacts, pragmatic contacts with our neighbors and with other countries.

The time will come, of course—we hope—that we'll have this possibility with Russia as well. Right now it's impossible, because Russia isn't changing anything in its policy. Russia isn't changing its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and so on. So first of all, the main thing is for Russia to take that back. I think that with a policy of neutrality and a pragmatic policy of cooperation with the superpowers and neighboring countries, this is the way to change Russia's approach in the future. It won't happen soon—we understand that—but we hope that, little by little, with this kind of policy, we'll get there.

#Pascal

I think that's a good strategy. It's a way of trying to assure Russia that Georgia wants to be a friend. So what would be the incentive to keep the occupation going? But in general, can you tell me a little bit about what you think the new party itself can achieve? Because I suppose that within Georgia, you still need to communicate this strategy as well, I assume.

#Konstatin Zghenti

We will explain this strategy—of course, it's the main strategy—to the people, not only in Tbilisi but also in our regions, so they understand what we want and how we plan to reach our goals. I think the situation around us now—the war in Ukraine—is very difficult, very difficult. Time shows, and everything shows, that it's very hard to reach peace there. And, you know, there are some moments that are closely connected to Georgia, because it's no secret that some Europeans wanted to have a second front here in Georgia.

Because their behavior was like this—because they wanted to sacrifice Georgians on the front, in the war, like they're doing with Ukrainians, unfortunately. To fight, you know, a proxy war with Russia. And we didn't do that—our government didn't. And that's very good. We support this policy of our government, and we're continuing this policy with the policy of neutrality. We think that neutrality will be more successful in our relations with our neighbors, even in the situation that's going on in Ukraine, you know? Why?

#Pascal

Yes, please. Sorry—why is it that in Georgia this appreciation for the necessity of neutrality has arisen? It's you, but not only you. I mean, there are people around your party, but also people in Georgian Dream and so on, who seem to have an awareness of the necessity of neutrality, whereas in Ukraine that failed. In Ukraine, the project to turn it into a proxy war was successful. What do you think helped Georgia achieve this kind of change in mentality?

#Konstatin Zghenti

Because the people of Georgia have very deep, so to say, experience with conflicts and wars throughout our history. Our people have this experience starting from ancient times and also in recent history, after regaining our independence. You know about the wars with Russia, you know about the conflicts here. So people understand how to act and how to think during conflicts—much more, I think, because of the realities in our country and in our region. They understand this much more deeply than in Ukraine, I think. And that was one reason. The second reason was, of course, the policy of the government.

The government was quite successful in this, even the current government in Georgia. And we agree with this policy. They are continuing with it, still declaring that they are committed to the rest of Georgia—Georgia as a state, as a sovereign country, and to the Georgian people. And of course, our

approach is the same. But we think—I'm repeating—that the policy of neutrality, a neutral Georgia, will be much more successful in this way than a country that keeps saying, "We are still going to be a member of the, I don't know, very strange European Union." What will happen in the future, nobody knows.

#Pascal

You know, I think your position will only get stronger, because right now it looks as though the greatest threat to the integrity of a NATO country is another NATO country. It seems that the United States wants to take over Greenland. Do you think, if that happens—if a NATO country basically takes away territory from another NATO country—that this will actually help your position in explaining why being outside a military alliance might be best?

#Konstatin Zghenti

You know, first of all, I want to say that all the events happening in global politics and in our nearby regions have their reflection in Georgia, of course, and on the situation in Georgia. That's for sure. It can be negative for us—I mean for Georgian neutrality and successful, you know, development—or positive. It all reflects on us. So, of course, we are closely watching what's going on between the United States and the European Union. I think the policy of the new government of the United States, you know, and the ideas of our government now, and of our party, in many things, they are the same.

What the Trump government is saying, we were saying a little while ago. And this, I think, is the ideology—that's one thing. Practically, I think the situation around Greenland, or other contradictions or problems between the United States and Europe, in the end, they won't lead to any kind of aggression or, you know, bad results. I think eventually they'll negotiate and reach some kind of agreement, even about Greenland, I'm sure, because nobody in the West wants a conflict that goes too far.

Right, right. I mean, I don't want to use the words "military conflict" or "war" or something like that, you know. But I think Trump is successful in that he announced a kind of policy. Some are against it, some are for it, some like it, some don't. But after some time, through negotiations, he's reaching his goals, I think. Even starting with economic relations with Mexico, Canada, or, you know, some other countries, or in situations where he's trying to find solutions to conflicts in the world.

#Pascal

Right. And you are a good diplomat, so of course you wouldn't try to offend any party. But, you know, we are moving toward— even if it's not a conflict— it is definitely coercive diplomacy that we're seeing.

#Konstatin Zghenti

I cannot speak any other way. I'm a diplomat by profession, and I speak like a diplomat.

#Pascal

How do you think Georgia can deal with coercive diplomacy when it comes? The thing is, coercive diplomacy can come from Russia, from the US, or from Europe. What's the most pragmatic way to respond when coercion comes to your doorstep?

#Konstatin Zghenti

Pragmatism founded on reality—this is the only way for a state or a country like Georgia. If you think about it, any government that was, is, or will be in Georgia must act pragmatically, grounded in reality. Not "I want this" or "I think that," but coming from reality. And the reality now shows that pragmatic relations with all our neighbors and with superpowers like China are essential. By the way, when the government is thinking about economic and trade agreements—free trade on one side with China, and on the other side with countries of the Near and Middle East and European countries—it's about playing the role of a bridge, a place of cooperation. That, I think, is a pragmatic approach to playing our role. If we develop this, based on the idea of neutrality, we will be more successful.

#Pascal

Are you planning to run for parliament as a party in the next election? What are your goals as a political party in Georgia?

#Konstatin Zghenti

Yes, we are going to take part in the elections—otherwise, we wouldn't have announced it. It was a political movement before, and now it's a party. We've registered as a political party. So this political force, now officially a party, wants to take part in the elections, of course, to explain our approaches and ideas to the people of Georgia and to gain supporters.

#Pascal

But is your goal, you know, to replace Georgian Dream as a party, or is it more about pushing Georgian Dream and other parties in the same direction? What's your approach?

#Konstatin Zghenti

You know, it's quite early to talk about this—to replace anyone, I mean—but theoretically, in the future, why not? It depends on the support from the people of Georgia. If our ideas gain the support of the population, then why not? Time will tell.

#Pascal

Time will certainly tell. When are the next parliamentary elections in Georgia?

#Konstatin Zghenti

In 2028.

#Pascal

Okay, so you basically have a two-year period now to prepare and present your arguments. When it comes to the national level, how does the foreign policy of neutrality connect with domestic political issues? How do you envision linking these two?

#Konstatin Zghenti

Because the people—first of all, the Georgian people—saw how not only policymakers but also the states and countries of the European Union wanted to use us, you know, in this proxy war. And I think they understood that; they saw it clearly. So, first of all, the current situation shows them that we, as a country, need somewhat different approaches, especially in this kind of relationship with the European Union. And we are proposing, we believe, a different approach to our development and our policy. I think this will resonate with the people and the population of Georgia.

#Pascal

I do hope it will work as a foreign policy, first and foremost. I also wish you a lot of luck with the political party. Thank you. Of course, there's a lot of work ahead. Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't covered yet?

#Konstatin Zghenti

You know, we'll soon have the program ready. We already have some of the main points of our party's program, and people know about this. The leaders of our party have already talked about it, but gradually it will include all directions—not only foreign policy, but also domestic and economic policy. And you know very well that the country's security, which I mentioned, is not only about military or political security. It's also economic security, internal economic stability, energy security, and information security.

And inside that is cybersecurity. It's also cultural security. So if the country, the state, doesn't have all these parts of security, then you can't really say you have the kind of security that, in perspective, allows you to develop peacefully and successfully. So we are working on all these parts, and we'll include them in our party's program, of course, and the population will know about it. We believe we'll have their support, because it will be based—let me repeat this—on a pragmatic approach founded on reality.

#Pascal

I find that a very, very important thing to base policy on. So please do send me the program once it's out. I'll also be happy to talk about this again. After all, this is one of the perennial topics of this channel, and we'll speak again in the future. Konstatin Zghenti, thank you very much for your time today.

#Konstatin Zghenti

Thank you for the invitation. Thank you.