

UK Sanctions Georgia. Azerbaijan Iran-War Threat | Lasha Kasradze

UK moves to sanctioning a Georgian TV network, while its own online safety laws punish citizens but exempt licensed news outlets. What is up between Europe and the Caucasus? To talk about this, I'm joined again today by my friend and colleague, international relations analyst Lasha Kasradze. Links: Lasha Kasradze on ACURA Exclusive: <https://usrussiaaccord.org/acura-exclusive/> Lasha Kasradze at The National Interest: <https://nationalinterest.org/profile/giorgi-lasha-kasradze> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch & Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:29 UK sanctions Imedi TV 00:07:20 Media sanctions and propaganda label 00:11:41 Online Safety Act double standards 00:15:31 Vance trip skips Georgia 00:28:44 TRIP corridor and Armenia dilemma 00:37:42 Iran escalation spillover risks 00:43:46 Azerbaijan dangerous balancing act 00:52:56 NGOs sovereignty and wrap up

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. My name is Pascal Lottaz. I'm an associate professor at Kyoto University, and today I'm joined by my friend and colleague, IR analyst Lascha Casarazze. Lascha, welcome back to the channel.

#Lasha Kasradze

Thank you. It's good to be back, Pascal.

#Pascal

Great having you again. Lascha, a lot of things are happening right now in and around Georgia, and you're the man to talk to about this one. Let's maybe start with something that surprised me the most. Just yesterday, you were actually the one who informed me. One of Georgia's largest private TV stations, Imedi TV, just got sanctioned by the UK. Can you give me the updates there and also let our viewers outside Georgia know what Imedi TV is and how big it is in the country?

#Lasha Kasradze

Absolutely. This is another bizarre event in the chain of many bizarre events that have befallen Georgia in the last few years and months. So, Imedi TV is the largest broadcasting network— for our Western audiences, I guess CNN or Fox News come to mind for comparison, just to give a sense of scale. But for a small country like Georgia, it's the most popular and kind of all-encompassing media

network. And just this morning, I heard, as did all my colleagues, that Imedi TV was sanctioned by the United Kingdom. The allegation is, as usual, that Imedi TV was provoking.

Just think about what they said. They were paraphrasing, of course, but claiming that Imedi TV was provoking or stoking more conflict in Ukraine. As if Imedi TV has anything to do with the conflict in Ukraine, or that it caused it, or somehow made it worse by saying that, basically, Georgia had made the right choice not to get entangled— not to open a second front or, in one way or another, provide military support to Ukraine— because it understood that doing so would be existential. It would present an existential threat for Georgia.

That's basically the narrative that, um, you know, Imedi TV and its editorial team have maintained all throughout, since the beginning of the war. Which, under normal circumstances—within a normal sort of collective psychological condition of a state—shouldn't be a shock or something so unacceptable that you can sanction, you know, a major TV station in a sovereign state. So you can see this sort of, you know, what we all know as liberal fascism. I don't know what else to call it. In other words, if you don't parrot their propaganda, then you have no right to speak. And they call it liberalism. They call that democracy. They call that the promotion of rights.

But if you reverse the situation—if you listen to, say, the opposition television stations that keep glorifying some of the neocon former stars, or famous, or infamous figures like Tori Nuland, for example—being a hero, a democracy exporter, this brave woman handing out sandwiches in the middle of Maidan in 2014—that's allowed. Propagating those very same individuals and propping up the reputations of people known to be neocons, known to have a visceral hatred of Russia, and basically known to be among the causes or provocateurs of this war—glorifying them and defending them publicly and in the media sphere—that's fine.

But anyone who says otherwise and says, "Wait a minute, you know, look, we appreciate what, say, the neocon establishment under Bush was trying to do, but that did not work out. So let's just step back from that and think twice before we get on that bandwagon of cursing Russia or continuing to allow Georgia to become this battering ram against Russia"—no, that's unacceptable. That's propaganda that's considered to be pro-Russian. So, in other words, long story short, the only time these people will be satisfied is if you sacrifice yourself for their ideology and for their visceral hatred of Russia, right?

#Pascal

Yeah, and again, this is—E-mini TV has a clear positioning, in my view, or from what I've heard from you, because I don't speak Georgian myself. But it has a clear positioning regarding the war in Ukraine and local politics and so on. But most TV stations do, and most newspapers do. I mean, we know what to expect from articles in The New York Times, and we know what to expect from

articles in other outlets, right? Having a political tint is normal. So the allegation that something is propaganda is really more an admission that one way of looking at international relations or politics is something you approve of, and the other way is something you don't.

But the fact that we are now in a world where the West—the free, liberal West—is starting to sanction news outlets left and right is really an admission that something has gone terribly wrong. Jacques Baud, my countryman who is now sanctioned in the EU, keeps pointing out that during the Cold War, in the West, in Europe, you could buy Pravda. My mother, who used to work at a station kiosk in several cities in Switzerland, said, "Oh yeah, we sold Pravda back in the '70s and '80s. We did. It was a popular one." And nobody had the idea of sanctioning Pravda because it was spreading Soviet propaganda—which it was—but it didn't matter. Now it suddenly does. Do you have any thoughts about this? And can you maybe tell us a little bit about where to position Emini TV in terms of their political stance?

#Lasha Kasradze

Absolutely, sure. So I'm going to build on what you just said. Basically, Imedi TV is no more propagandistic than what we see here on, say, Fox News, CNN, or MSNBC. You know, it's one thing to lie blatantly, to manufacture truths—and I don't think any freshman student of journalism would approve of that, right? But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about having a certain direction, a certain narrative within the editorial and broadcasting philosophy of Imedi TV that supports a particular position. If you have another television station that opposes that position, by all means, present your case, right? Let's have that media space be a free exchange of ideas, if you will.

Remember, this is what they encourage, right? From the European Union and from Washington—fostering differences of opinion and critical thinking. Well, what Imedi TV has been doing is basically arguing that blind adherence to Western propaganda—and first of all, it defined it as propaganda, which it turned out to be, as we all know in the collective West—will cause Georgia more harm than good. And, you know, Imedi TV, whether there have been some rotten journalists, some bad apples, just like in any organization—you might have no idea who these people are—but overall, Imedi TV has done a pretty good job of portraying the spectrum and the dangers facing Georgian politics, both internally and externally.

And it informed people as such. You know, those who listen—I don't know the exact statistics—but about half the country listens to Imedi TV. And now you're telling them, no, you can't broadcast your views publicly, or the information based on your research. Then the simple question becomes: what do we tell Georgian society, the segment of society that listens to us? "Well, we don't care." So just imagine, it's not just about Imedi TV as a corporation or a business entity, or even as a so-called propaganda organization, but most importantly, what do you tell the people? You basically have a foreign power forbidding one of the biggest television stations from informing its own population. That's what it comes down to.

And I, as someone who observes this and analyzes what Imedi TV has done and how it broadcasts its news and analysis, I really don't see anything worth panicking about or any kind of catastrophic practice in the media sphere that it's engaged in. It basically has a certain direction. It disagrees with the liberal internationalist and liberal hegemonic approach. It disagrees with the support of murderous regimes like Saakashvili's. Because it was Saakashvili's regime, under the banner of democracy promotion under George W. Bush, that actually physically raided Imedi TV. We're talking about the paradox and contradiction of the century. I mean, these people are telling you about democracy and freedom of speech and freedom of the media, while their goons, supported by policy, are using special forces to raid your offices. So—

#Pascal

That's what Imedi TV has basically stood against. You know, to me, it's just another example of blatant hypocrisy. And I just need to make this point, Lascha, to show you this one here. You know, I hope I can make it a little bit bigger—let's see. Anyhow, what the UK enacted in 2023, the Online Safety Act, just for a bit of context about the world we're moving into now—where the UK, with this provision that I'll show you in its legal code, is accusing Georgia of blatant misinformation. In the Online Safety Act, paragraph 179 defines "false communication offenses."

A person commits an offense if they send a message that conveys information they know to be false. At the time of sending it, the person intends the message or the information in it to cause non-trivial psychological or physical harm to a likely audience, and they have no reasonable excuse for sending the message. This is a communication offense in the UK. But what I want to point out is that the very next paragraph, 180—so, you're not allowed to lie. The UK punishes you if you lie on social media or in the media in general. You're not allowed to commit a false communication offense. But Article 180—exemptions from the offense.

A recognized news publisher cannot commit an offense under paragraph 179—just for everybody to see. It's like the UK officially allows their broadcasters—the BBC is officially allowed to lie. They have the okay from His Majesty's government to commit communication offenses that everybody else is not allowed to do. And, you know, if you're an official broadcaster, then sure, go ahead, you can do this. That's the country—with that kind of regulation in its legal code—that is sanctioning a foreign TV station for committing offenses. It's just mind-boggling. It's hypocritical beyond belief. But, Lascha...

#Lasha Kasradze

But it's also very Orwellian. Have you noticed how the language is so Orwellian? The way they write, the way they say who can speak and who cannot speak. I'm glad you dug this document out. This is good.

#Pascal

Yeah, and it's an important document. This is the Online Safety Act. This is how the UK can legally approach and indict people under its legal codes, right? So you can be punished for all of this. Good thing to know that the BBC cannot be punished for—well, any holder of a broadcasting license cannot be punished for saying something knowingly untrue. Yeah, so we see how there are definitely two sets of standards, right? One set applies to us and the official ones, and everybody who has a license from us, and another set applies to everybody else. And we, from a high horse, then tell everybody what kind of bad people they are. Anyhow, is there anything more to add about Imedi TV, or shall we move to another saga, which is Mr. Vance visiting the region—the Caucasus—but skipping Georgia?

#Lasha Kasradze

Correct. Well, on Imedi TV, I think we pretty much covered it. It's a great tragedy, really—mostly of the Western world. Um, you know, as we've mentioned many, many times before, they're becoming sort of victims of their own fanaticism and ideology. And it's sad to see that this is happening in the West. Like you mentioned about Pravda and the Soviet-era media, where people only had one or two channels—you know, it was understood what was happening. But when the West comes in, in the post-Cold War era, and declares freedom and prosperity and rights for everyone, and now we sort of degenerate into such pathologies, this is really sad to watch. But in terms of Imedi TV, there's nothing exclusively horrible about what Imedi TV has done.

And it's basically, you know, I've done business there. First of all, I have to say this as a kind of warning, so others won't accuse me of hypocrisy. But, you know, we would talk about every single sort of problem in foreign policy and in the changing world affairs that you and I and our colleagues have constantly discussed. Then we would broadcast that for the Georgian audience. And there was nothing wrong with that. We brought in some really high-quality people and high-quality guests—including you, of course. When we first started out, I think, collectively speaking, those wonderful guests and people who graciously agreed to come on Imedi provided very objective, well-researched, scholarly opinions, and their reputations are unshakable. So that's what Imedi has been doing, as far as I know.

#Pascal

Our colleague Ian Proud, a former UK diplomat, actually does have a—I don't know whether it's a weekly show or not—but he also broadcasts over there. So, I mean, good people. A lot of good people were using Imedi, and you don't have to agree with them. You can disagree, you can think they're wrong, and you can argue against them. And you can go and broadcast that on any kind of station or channel you want. But we're now at the sad point where the West isn't trying to compete anymore for opinions and so on, but just resorts to blatant sanctioning and censorship. It's basically a censorship approach. Although in this case, since it can't censor directly in Georgia, it does the next best thing—tries to hurt these institutions economically as much as possible.

#Lasha Kasradze

Just one last point on Imedi TV. They're basically equating criticism, questioning, and any discussion of the validity of this war—and especially Georgia's position. Georgia has been helping Ukraine on the international scene, supporting its sovereignty. It's been an unrelenting proponent of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. But Georgia has declared that militarily we won't be able to help, because it would be suicidal. The moment you start to get into that territory, they equate that with being anti-Ukraine. That's how propagandistic this whole thing has become. They really leave you no benefit of the doubt, and then you're automatically labeled pro-Russian. That's sad.

#Pascal

It is sad, but it is what it is. Let's move to Vance. So, why did he skip Georgia? Why did he visit everyone except Georgia? And were you guys—were you pleased?

#Lasha Kasradze

Well... when the news first spread, it caused shockwaves—political shockwaves, if you will. I didn't think it was going to be some sort of catastrophic rejection of Georgia after 30 years of U.S.-Georgian partnership, right? Nothing anywhere near that. You know, politics is very sensitive. And when the vice president of the United States skips Georgia—one of the central countries in the South Caucasus—and goes to, say, Azerbaijan, not that Azerbaijan or Armenia are any less important, but I'm just saying, traditionally speaking, we remember the days when George W. Bush came to Tbilisi in 2005. It was a historic trip, which eventually upset the natural order of things to the point where 2008 followed three years later.

Nevertheless, Georgia was this beacon of liberty—to repeat George W. Bush's words—in the region. Since then, of course, opposition figures, radicals, pro-Westerners, so to speak, have accused Georgia of turning its back on the collective West. But clearly, this has nothing to do with that. Georgia has realized that this is basically the era of myth-shattering and myth-collapsing. That whole sort of neoliberal, neocon propaganda was falling apart, and they just had to really save their skin and act more pragmatically toward Russia. OK, so that's the long story short. But in terms of Vance's visit to the South Caucasus, here's the irony: Georgia is very well positioned strategically.

Georgia has shown, behind the scenes, strategic patience and—to a large extent, I would even say—confidence. Even though politically this skipping of Georgia didn't look good, you can't really hide that fact. I think in the long term Georgia is recouping this now, in a sense, because—given its geopolitical position—Georgia is indispensable. You can't dispense with Georgia. It's an indispensable state in the middle of the South Caucasus. It borders the Black Sea—that's the exit from the Black Sea coast toward Europe. And now, if you recall my good colleagues, the Georgian paradigm of peace, that whole concept—that's the irony of it.

Vance's trip, in my view, has brought back the theories and concepts that have been discussed in Tbilisi with my colleagues. The United States is finally starting to look at the South Caucasus as a geoeconomic project—perhaps not relegating geopolitics to the margins, because geopolitics will always be there—but looking at the region more transactionally, certainly devoid of liberal-internationalist hubris, right? That whole ideology is gone. And now the entire strategic focus is on geoeconomic projects. You could say this is a kind of Trojan horse, yet another way of balancing against Russia, if not worse. It's also about isolating Iran because of that Zangezur corridor.

This is about enhancing and deepening the whole Turkic world and advancing a kind of Israeli-backed Azerbaijan policy—a sort of powerhouse vis-à-vis Turkey. But, you know, I think that's a stretch. Yes, there is a danger of that, but I've always countered that argument by saying that Russia sits in the middle of all this. In its traditional understanding of the region, Russia will never give up its vital national security interests. I've also always said that Georgia and the region, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have been known for geoeconomic projects to which Russia has acquiesced in the past. So, you know, I think I'm just going to leave it within those contours, because—well, to go back to Georgia—I think Georgia will not lose its position. Far from it, even though the trip, right, Trump's new project that he sent Vance for, to Baku and Yerevan, might suggest otherwise.

So we have the Caspian Sea. The mosaic hasn't really changed much. The middle corridor—the multimodal middle corridor—is one of the key transit routes where Georgia plays a major role. This is yet another addition. So Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan—they're all coming down through the Caspian Sea and then, via Georgia, into the Black Sea and Turkey, right? So Georgia is not losing its geopolitical stance or geoeconomic importance. The only thing that Georgia, in my view, has to worry about is economics itself. Domestically speaking—the trade balance, the manufacturing sector—they have to improve on that, right? In other words, its own economic and manufacturing base.

But in terms of the idea that Georgia will be sort of extracted out—plucked out of its historic region because of the trip or because of the Zangezur Corridor—quite the contrary. It's a complementary project, in my view. And Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, just recently, about a week or so ago at a security conference, declared outright that Georgia not only complements this project, but he thanked the Tbilisi officials for working with Baku when Baku transferred its first load of commodities and energy products through Armenia. So he was, basically, openly supportive of Georgia's role in the region.

So you see, in terms of basic geoeconomic infrastructure, Georgia occupies a central role as a transit state. And there's plenty of room to build on that as well—mainly, of course, the Middle Corridor, also called the Trans-Caspian Corridor. So I think Georgia is fine in terms of strategy and long-term positioning in the region. One thing that could be concerning, though, is how Georgia handles the changing environment with the United States and with Europe. In my view, it just has to deepen its

diplomatic relations with Washington. I might be wrong on this, but it just needs to be more active and more present.

That's the area where Georgia could use, I would argue, some help. But other than that, I think Tbilisi has shown some serious patience—strategic patience—and I'm pretty sure that, at the end of the day, they will improve their relations with Washington and things will get back to normal. There's no fundamental reason why Washington's sort of ignoring of Georgia should take place. Georgia stands ready on sociocultural, geopolitical, and economic issues, and in terms of its overall adherence to Western values and its partnership with the United States.

#Pascal

Yeah, and the funny thing is that you have all these accusations of Georgia not playing along with the West when, in fact, it's been doing everything it could to integrate. They still wish to, of course, join the EU. But I just want to show this little picture here so everybody understands what this new geoeconomic project is that the United States officially kicked off—this "Trump Route for Peace and Prosperity" trip. I don't know why he always needs to put his name on every single project he works on, but okay, fine, that's just the narcissism. What we're talking about here is a trade route from the Caspian Sea, from Azerbaijan, then going into Armenia. This little sliver here is an Azerbaijani enclave, right? So it's connecting Azerbaijan with Azerbaijan. But in the middle, you have Armenia—and the whole project, at the moment, is not a done deal yet. Let me see if I can actually make this a little bit bigger.

#Pascal

No, here—maybe like this. No.

#Pascal

Sorry, here—like this. The little sliver here is Armenian territory, and under the current project, which is not yet law in Armenia, not yet ratified—it's just, so far, a letter of intent—the idea is to give this little piece, about 50 kilometers or so, if I... if I remember correctly.

#Lasha Kasradze

Forty-four kilometers, if I'm not mistaken.

#Pascal

Forty-four kilometers right at the border with Iran would be leased to the United States for 99 years, and it would basically be a U.S. military contractor-controlled route, located exactly at the border with Iran. From there, it would lead into the enclave, then further into Turkey, and from there it

could go into Europe or the Mediterranean. That's the idea of this great connection from the Caspian to the rest of Europe. And of course, this is highly problematic because it's at the border with Iran and because it would more or less cut off North–South trade, right?

It will be physically in the way of North–South trade. Not that Azerbaijan is currently very supportive of Russian–Iranian trade through its territory, and not that there isn't a way through the Caspian Sea to do this, but it's going to be another geoeconomic project in the region. Now, was Vance's trip solely connected to this one—trying to negotiate with Azerbaijan and Armenia—or did you actually see more going on behind the scenes in the Vance trip?

#Lasha Kasradze

Sure. Well, we can take this a step further. In addition to this major geoeconomic project, the question arises geopolitically: where does this leave Armenia? Because I think Azerbaijan is in a much stronger position, right? Azerbaijan is much more allied with Turkey, Israel, and so on. Armenia—and this is where I mentioned Georgia's sort of strategic patience—comes in handy here, because Armenia jumped into this, just dived in. It's lost its territory, right? Let's be honest about what happened with the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan won, took its, you know, thirty-plus years of recognized territory back—Nagorno-Karabakh. And now Armenia is being viewed as basically desperate. The strategic and political risk that Armenia faces, I think, is much higher than either Georgia in its current state or Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has fully restored its sovereignty, and it's got backing from the Western world, basically. But Armenia's situation—especially with, well, basically, no security guarantees coming from the West—is very different. It has promises that the United States might rebuild or restore its old Soviet nuclear program infrastructure for civilian use, right? Russia isn't saying much about it, because it still has those Soviet-era civilian nuclear plants in operation. And one of the projects, one of the trip's plans, is to rebuild—using Western, mainly American, money—Armenia's energy infrastructure.

Um, and to what extent they will actually do that also hangs in the air. Russia watches this very carefully. And, you know, short of actually equipping Armenia with military support, yes, Russia might acquiesce to a lot of what's taking place. But the only reason Russia is doing that, in my view, is because it knows Armenia has nowhere else to go—other than perhaps hoping the United States will redevelop its economic infrastructure, for example. Armenia's long-term strategy hasn't been defined. It's doing what it's doing just to survive, basically, but it can't really get out of Russia's control and influence, even though Trump is coming in promising all kinds of goodies for Armenia's economic long-term development.

So then the question is, will the region turn back into what we've talked about—this geopolitical space where geoeconomics will prevail and national security interests will be balanced by large investments, say, from America, right? And as long as those red lines are not crossed, will the region reshape itself into this kind of geopolitical space where all these major and middle powers get along

more or less based on commercial interests and transactions? That's basically what a lot of people in Georgia have been saying: open up the region, focus on bringing in these major powers, and let their strategic interests translate into geoeconomic interests, which would dramatically reduce the possibility of actual wars breaking out every five or ten years or so.

And if—look—if Trump manages to do this, more power to him, right? If Trump manages to—well, I don't think Putin will oppose or sabotage it. Again, this is mostly economics and geoeconomics, so there's potential there for collaboration and cooperation, regionally and internationally. But nevertheless, Armenia has to watch where it's going and what it hopes for, because again, it's naked—strategically, it's naked. It's got no guarantees that the West, in my opinion, will ever provide.

#Pascal

No, no, I mean, if you look at this, you realize that if Azerbaijan did to mainland Armenia what it did to Nagorno-Karabakh—and Nagorno-Karabakh was an Armenian enclave inside mainland Azerbaijan—well, you know, it wouldn't change that much geoeconomically, right? Azerbaijan and Turkey are very strong allies. They're closely connected, also through religion and so on. You can see that the biggest squeeze at the moment is definitely on Armenia. And Georgia to the north, in this sense, is a little bit outside the area of intense competition. I mean, if you're squeezed between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, this is a very important area geopolitically and geoeconomically—one that should be a buffer and a bridge, and hopefully not a front in the next kind of confrontation, which maybe gives us a segue into the question of Iran.

I mean, there's a lot of tension right now, of course, because in the south you've got all this naval buildup and the U.S. threats of using its navy against Iran. But in the north, during the last war—the 12-day war—Azerbaijan also played along with the United States, at least for intelligence gathering, providing its territory to do so. And there are considerable fears that Azerbaijan, in the next round of exchanges and blows, might actually become a staging ground to attack Iran from the north. How likely do you think it is that the Caucasus will become some sort of theater of war against Iran?

#Lasha Kasradze

The Caucasus will be sort of the outer limit. It will be affected, but not directly. In terms of logistics, Georgia will be affected, and Armenia will be affected. I think Armenia has to be especially careful here because Iran has supported Armenia, and it really should think twice about where to put its strategic eggs—in which basket. Iran has, sure, supported Russia as well, but it has also maintained a modicum of stability in the region, vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Armenia. It has supported Armenia again in its separatist war between the two countries. So certainly, first and foremost, refugees—but then refugee flows—that raises enormous risks for Georgia as well.

But then also, mechanisms of trade might be disrupted. You know, I think on that trip, if Russia becomes very proactive—right, Russia will become very proactive—and the trip might be... if the

Zangezur Corridor becomes the only corridor protected under the aegis of the United States, then Washington's policy toward the Zangezur Corridor and the whole trip will escalate to balance against any north-south or east-west corridors that might compete with it, especially if we can isolate Iran. Well, Russia won't like that at all. So where Armenia ends up stuck in this equation is another question. I think there will be disruptions both in geoeconomic connectivity projects—physical projects—there might be a disruption.

And then also, geopolitically, these small states will face a choice, basically. One of the reasons Georgia is, I would argue, undervalued or sort of under the radar, is because it doesn't really want to be seen as aligning with either of these regional states, while keeping its relations with all of them on an even keel, if you will. That's the smartest policy they can pursue. But with Armenia—if the United States, by that time, starts to look at this and says, "Look, this is our long-term investment, and you either have to support us vis-à-vis Iran, either through some logistical projects or by accepting refugees"—then Armenia will find itself in a pickle, in my view.

So, um, you know, Georgia will also be pressured. It depends on the scale, the depth, and the breadth of this conflict, and how large it becomes. You know, we all know by now that it won't be a surgical attack, even though Washington might be feeling a little emboldened after the twelve-day war. General Kane, a very respected general, just recently—I'm sure you've heard—basically said, I think it was either in the Wall Street Journal or during the Security Council meeting, that if the United States decides to attack Iran, this will be a major problem. It would trigger a regional flare-up that the U.S. would not be able to control afterward—obviously including the shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz, damage to energy infrastructure, and the skyrocketing of energy prices, et cetera, et cetera.

So, but you know, every equation basically argues against the invasion—against bombing Iran and going ahead with this campaign. But again, this shows you the implications: how wide-ranging and regionally all-encompassing this could become, so that the overflow effect will certainly be felt in the South Caucasus. Georgia will probably be pressured, you know, in terms of forbidding the use of its airspace. Refugees will have to come in, and overall, the disruption of geoeconomic connectivity projects will certainly be at risk.

#Pascal

Yeah, looking only at the South and basically at the Middle Eastern theater doesn't cut it, right? It will have direct influence to the north as well, to the Caucasus. And the dangers are quite large. What's your—what's your assessment of how you think Azerbaijan will play this? Mr. Aliyev, who has been very, very pro-U.S., but also, surprisingly, very pro-Israeli in his rhetoric—which, for a Turkic Muslim nation, is quite surprising to me.

But Azerbaijan is playing, in my view, a very dangerous game—also with its very strong anti-Russian rhetoric, including the outrage over some arrests of Azerbaijani criminal gangs in Russia last year.

There was also an airplane incident that Russia apologized for, which was used quite a bit for PR purposes in Azerbaijan. What's your assessment of this? And why is Mr. Aliyev playing such a dangerous game for a country that could be directly involved in very, very dangerous military affairs?

#Lasha Kasradze

I would personally analyze Mr. Aliyev's recent leadership as someone getting a bit carried away with his success. He's conducted some brilliant regional foreign policy, but then the question becomes: when do you slow down? I'm sure he understands the Russian factor—that there's a limit to this kind of hubris. There's also talk that they might be looking at the balkanization of Iran. There's a large minority of Azerbaijani Iranians living there. The idea of separatism actually comes more from the collective West, from Washington's thinking—that if regime change isn't going to happen, they might try to dissect the country into ethnic minorities. Do you think he's getting ready for the spoils of war?

#Pascal

You think that's on his mind? Like, yeah—if Iran breaks up, we'll go and take the Azeri part.

#Lasha Kasradze

Correct. But then what will Russia do? I think if I'm Azerbaijan, I'd just stay back and watch this happen. I wouldn't get involved, because, again, Russia doesn't forget anything that's happening in the region—believe me. Russia is watching this very carefully. Russia understands the red lines. China understands Russia's red lines, not to mention the three South Caucasus republics. So I think when it comes to geopolitics and the national security interests of the Russian Federation, Aliyev understands he can only push the envelope so far. There's an economic interdependence between the two countries—Azerbaijan needs Russia. And Russia can spoil Azerbaijan's parade very quickly.

It can disrupt economic trade. It can come up with some scandalous report that shuts down exports or imports, and that's something Aliyev really needs to avoid. You know, I think it's understood at this point—if I'm Aliyev, I'm just sitting back and watching. I wouldn't want to look like I'm getting some sort of Mossad intelligence, or becoming a hub for Israel against Iran in the region, or for some kind of NATO troop buildup against Iran. That's not what I'd want to do—against Russia either, or even be perceived that way, because that would trigger another security dilemma. And we saw that classic security dilemma with Russia and Ukraine. So that's the kind of situation Baku will have to avoid, in my view.

#Pascal

Yes, but you and I—we're good neutralists, in the sense that we think countries should have good relationships with all other countries as much as possible. But we know there are people who don't think like that, right? We know there's the NATO crowd, which thinks only in terms of deterrence,

like, as Jeffrey Sachs keeps saying, “on the chessboard—where are my pieces?” And they’d love to incorporate a piece in the South Caucasus into their realm, right? So... but you don’t think Mr. Aliyev is crazy enough to actually go for that, to basically open himself up to becoming a NATO hub?

#Lasha Kasradze

No. If he does, it would be a huge mistake on his part, and I think he’s too clever for that. In the long-term strategic view, he understands that Russia won’t tolerate it. The Kremlin has mentioned that in numerous locations. So the question we have to ask ourselves is: once this war is over—Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—and a lot of experts, as we all know, say it’s going to end through a military rather than a diplomatic solution, once it’s over, however ugly that victory may be for Russia, what will happen then? Russia will revert and take another look at its backyard.

There’s no doubt in my mind. And there’s also no doubt that Russia is a much more powerful military state than Azerbaijan. There isn’t a single country in the region that would come to Azerbaijan’s aid—God forbid—if Russia decided to start some kind of military conflict there. The United States wouldn’t come, because it’s not NATO territory. It’s the Caspian region, the South Caucasus. In other words, the same formula that’s been used to mislead these three republics—and mostly, in this case, Georgia—still remains a very effective formula.

Provoke Russia, make these countries feel like they can come in and do business with us, attract them as much as possible, then escalate the situation until Russia says, “Enough is enough,” and then abandon them at the end. In my view, geostrategically, that formula hasn’t changed, simply because the West doesn’t have tangible, concrete instruments of power to block Russia or to do nation-building in the South Caucasus to the point where it would collapse, or to build some sort of strategic sanitarium against Russia. It can’t create a separate haven under Russia’s strategic underbelly. So that’s what we need to constantly keep in mind. Yes, it was a brilliant victory on Aliyev’s part. He gained enormous respect, reputation, and power—but there was a limit to that strategic vision. And I think that’s understood in Moscow, and it’s understood in Baku.

#Pascal

One thing to keep in mind is that Azerbaijan is quite—well, Mr. Aliyev’s rule isn’t the most democratic in the world, let’s put it that way—but the Azerbaijani political system is probably not as captured by Western NGOs as others are. Also, Georgia has actually managed to have laws on its books that ensure some transparency, because we’ve seen the approach of the West, of the United States, to basically foster client regimes through infiltrating civil society. And I’m sorry I have to put it in these words, but that’s what it is. That’s what all these approaches are—having NGOs that work in the media space, that work in civil society, that then influence government, that then influence political parties, and that then gain adherence to certain policies.

That's what this is made of—the whole National Endowment for Democracy, the kind of sponsored organizations. And we've seen how, in the Caucasus, maybe the only place where this has been working somewhat is actually Armenia, where we now have, in my view, a kind of democratic backsliding under the current leadership, against forces that would be very friendly to Georgia's approach of trying not to make enemies. But Georgia—and Azerbaijan too, in this sense—I would say are still under a more independent, nationalistic kind of leadership that would be able to oppose suicidal policies. Or do you see it differently?

#Lasha Kasradze

No, I mean, I wouldn't quite compare—well, I want to compare, sort of, Georgia's government with that of Aliyev's. You know, Azerbaijan's internal government model is different, and it's their business. But in terms of Georgia—Georgia has elections, except that, of all the people in the world, it's our Western partners who don't want to recognize those elections. So you can see what sort of mad, mad, mad world we're living in. But generally speaking, Georgia's internal political and domestic environment is quite vibrant. If there were a healthy opposition—and by the way, the opposition has admitted this before too—they just haven't been able to put together a cohesive democratic coalition, other than wanting to overthrow everything they dislike. But even then, you mentioned NGOs. Well, we know that the NGO issue has been constant in Georgia for the past, let's say, five years.

And some of our colleagues have written great analyses on that—how USAID, for example, if it hadn't been shut down, who knows how much more pressure you would have come under. And we also know now, in retrospect, that yes, the National Endowment for Democracy and the think tanks on the neocon and neoliberal side are all part of a huge, well, sort of ideological system that has directly or indirectly played a role in, at the very least, escalating the situation—polarizing society between pro- and anti-Russian, and pro- and anti-Western. And that's how they always maintain this sort of plausible deniability: “No, it wasn't us. We just promote democracy. We're just telling you what the rule of law is and what liberal institutionalism means.”

#Pascal

But if you don't do as we tell you, then we're going to sanction you. You will be sanctioned. How can we be sanctioned?

#Lasha Kasradze

And Georgia has survived through all that, which is really commendable. And yes, Georgia has a lot of problems—I always say that—but overall, none of these problems is worth overthrowing the

government. It's not even close to that issue. But again, it's our democratic friends who want that to happen. So I think, just to go back to your point very quickly about Azerbaijan and Georgia, one commonality I'd point out is that both states are pro-self-interest and sovereignty.

#Pascal

That's what I meant when I compared them. They're completely different systems, but they have the ability to think about what's best for them—as opposed to, let's say, Ukraine.

#Lasha Kasradze

Which is something we can't quite say about Armenia right now, right? Because again—what does Armenia want? Is it sovereignty, or whatever is left of it? Or does it want to embrace something abstract and not really embraceable? I think that's where the big strategic difference lies between, say, Georgia and Armenia. Georgia is sitting back, having learned its lesson, and trying to get as much self-sufficiency out of that strategy as possible without getting too excited.

#Pascal

Right.

#Lasha Kasradze

Right. Okay.

#Pascal

I think that really brought us back and closed the circle, because, you know, we're back at what—the Western approach to its liberal democracy is: anything that supports it is "democracy," and anything that doesn't share our view of how politics should develop is "authoritarian" and needs to be fought against. Like Imedi TV now, unfortunately. Lasha, for people who want to follow your work and your analysis, where should they go?

#Lasha Kasradze

They should go and check out the Neutrality Studies site. They can also look up my articles on ACURA and in The National Interest.

#Pascal

Okay. I'll try to link all of these sources in the description below. Pascal Lottaz, thank you very much for your time today.

#Lasha Kasradze

Thank you so much, Pascal.