*Information about interviewee:*

*Irakli Menagarishvili was the Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Russian-Georgian conflict and during the Russian ‘passportization’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Interview was conducted in Tbilisi, Georgia.*

*R= Respondent – Irakli Menagarishvili*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: When did passportization begin and when did the Georgian state realise it was happening?

R: To take it into a wider context, nobody really knows when the Russian special services started doing something. Most probably they started issuing Russian passports to locals to people they wanted to be under control even before. But en masse, this process started at the end of 2001 or 2002. Was it related to the decision of the Russian side to punish Georgia, we call it, for not being supportive in their second Chechen campaign? There was a quite an unpleasant developed, but it was directly related to Putin's personality, at that time he was just Prime Minister, the second Chechen campaign, in August 2000 or 1999, through Yeltsin he asked to allow Russian troops to approach Chechnya, also from the South, but the only way to do this is to do this was through Georgian territory. There are some differences of narratives, I've heard from different colleagues, I was foreign minister at the time, but we the Georgian side, finally said no. The reason was we would have been dragged into the war with the Chechens, which was totally unacceptable for us, especially at that time, when we had almost already shaped up our strategic orientation. In December that year, we finalised the process of getting an agreement from Russia, with Russian military bases in Georgia. The early oil pipeline was already functioning, it started in April 1996 and April 1999 it was put into use. A number of other developments took place and we thought that our main goal is to maintain somehow a balance of relationship in the region with our partners and so on. And there was no desire for Georgia to join the military operations out of our territory, especially with the north Caucasians. The Russians were furious and later on I learned how they reacted. Why I am talking about all this? I am convinced, I believe strongly that these two developments are tied to each other. The first punishing step was Russia's statement in November or December 1999 which imposed the need of a visa regime to enter Russia for all Georgian citizens. Georgia at the time was a CIS member. All over the CIS there was no visa regime movement agreement. The only exception was Turkmenistan who left this agreement and did so in a civilised way. Turkmen diplomats visited Georgia, as well as every other capital and signed the agreement and everything was settled in the normal civilised way. Russia just declared that there was a decision of the security council of the Russian Federation to introduce visas for Georgian citizens, in a strange way. Those living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia they remained free of this law. They could use non-visa entry right into Russia. I think you understand what it means, a very simple and transparent step to impose a punishing and retaliatory step. The regime itself came into force and started functioning, to the best of my knowledge, in end of middle 2000. The papers had to formalised and the papers were quite long, tense negotiations took place in Moscow. Finally we signed these papers, formally refusing this condition for the Abkhaz, not for the Abkhazian nationals, but for those living in Abkhazia. Russia did not care. They had made their decision and they allowed them to enter Russia without visas. Either Soviet passports and many people from the post-Soviet space had Soviet passport, or some from the governments from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Why am I focussing on this issue? It is clear that these were the initial steps towards the offering the Russian passports to them. In 2001 or 2002 the Russian Duma adopted a law on Russian citizenship where they put that any citizen of the former Soviet Union, to get Russian passports, or to swap their Soviet passports for Russian passports, and thus directly acquire Russian citizenship. No matter if these people have relations with other countries, Georgian, Ukrainian, Uzbek and so on. From the legal point of view, there is nothing criminal in this decision, but based on this, the practices of amending this law was totally legal, they provided some non-governmental structures by the way, clearly of nationalist character. For example, Congress of Russian Communities, or Representatives of Union Russians in Abkhazia. They allowed them to open special offices to take applications from Abkhazia and in Tskhinvali from Ossetian inhabitants. They were of course Georgian citizens, but nevertheless with Soviet passports and provided them with Russian passports. Technically everything was formalised on the Russian territories by several different state offices, most probably the police offices, but the direct contact with locals was led by these so-called semi-formal representatives, it had nothing to do with the Russian foreign office or diplomatic services. It started that. Of course we expressed our protest and we applied to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and presented our protest notes. Georgia applied to the OSCE the Council of Europe, the United Nations, claiming that what Russia is doing now is a blatant, brazen violation of every international rule and practice. But they didn't care. They always referred to the letter of the law when it comes to citizenship, but there was a very weak or unclear connection to this. Informal bodies are not allowed to issue passports or collect applications, no technicalities, it’s simple, if you are or are being a citizen of the Soviet Union, you are allowed to become Russian citizens. Ok, it is your decision, but how to do it? It was clear from the very beginning that it was a sort of spreading out in order to create the ground for some activities later on, as a pretext for anti-Georgian actions, under the slogan of securing interests of co-citizens, fellow citizens and so on. As the following developments have proven, what we thought, has been proven to be correct and right. Because in Abkhazia and South Ossetian in 2008, the Russian military operations were very often referred to as the protect the rights of Russian citizens in Georgia. What kind of Russian citizens? Those who have Russian passports. That is why it is very very disturbing, what Putin is doing in Ukraine, as it is clearly the same. Absolutely the same. Absolutely the same. An exact copy of those activities, just to create a mass of Russian passport holders, to have a legal, in Russian understanding, right to protect their rights and so on and so on. If Ukraine tries to restore the territorial autonomy.

I: Were you expecting passportization to occur following the Russian citizenship law passed in 2002?

R: No of course not. It was just one day, a statement from the Russian Foreign Affairs, or state Duma, I don't remember, made it public that the government has directed to the Duma a project. The procedure was very speedy, of course without consultation of the neighbouring states where they intended to spread out their passports. It is worth mentioning that Russian legislation allowed for dual citizenship, so they have no problem with this. This is a clear, criminal activity, using state papers with the purpose to set the environment leading to the tensions, military activities and violating the rights of the people of the former Soviet Union.

I: Did passportization change the conflict on a practical level?

R: No. No. They would do the same anyway, but this is one of the components of the set of activities they planned. It didn't justify or give any justification to the Russian Federation. No one in the war was referring to the Russian passports, but they did what they want to do. For their internal use, addressing their own public opinion, it works. It was stated that we were protecting our fellow citizens who are just living there. We have thousands of Abkhazians and other citizens living there. Being our fellow citizens, Russian citizens with Russian passports, we have to protect their rights and property. The same rhetoric, however false, but it was quite effective when addressing Russian people. Russian minds and hearts and so on. I would say quite nationalist emotions and so on.

I: Do you think Russia will attempt to annex these territories in the future?

R: It depends on what happens in Georgia and how Georgia behaves, I would say. It is clear that they don't need these pieces of land as a territory, they are occupied just to create some leverage over Georgia. The use this territory under de facto occupation and keep it under control has proven to be effective, so they have tightened. Logically they should not be interested in formalising this annexation. They will use the effectiveness of these tools, now they are using this to push Georgia, or hoping that Georgian foreign policy or behaviour will be somehow managed or directed. For example, they want Georgia to say no to European integration, if we already formalise this, no matter how long term, but if we feel like we have already lost these territories, they could not be used as a hindering factor for our aspirations to join NATO. It seems like they will try to use all these tools for as long as possible, but everything depends on how the West is reacting, how the world is reacting. I would say the largest failures of the Western civilised war, opinion and politics, that they have clearly framed this as an isolated Georgian-Russian problem, and not a wider Russian problem. We were shouting that this is just the beginning, and they will go onto other territories. My feeling is that our call was not received seriously, but then in 2014, they suddenly realised that we were right. When Russia simply grabbed Crimea and started a war with Ukraine, what far? Just to prevent them from signing an association agreement with the EU. Which means nothing! It is not joining the EU and so on. But what Mr Putin wanted was to continue the process of inhaling the entire Ukraine, to the new Eurasian economic Union, new form of the Soviet Union and if Georgia was just a small case, just a case of a test of Russia forces, Ukraine is principally important. After that everything has become crystal clear for everyone, but it is too late for the Georgian case unfortunately.

I: One theory suggests that Ukraine as a country is stronger if the Ukrainian state relinquish hope of regaining control of Crimea and Donbas. Is similar said here about Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

R: Yes, we have already said that, not formally, it was not our internal decision, but it was loudly sounded by civil society and I personally said that if NATO membership requires Georgia to be free of territorial claims with their neighbours, let's put those problems aside and join NATO and then start working on these territorial solutions. Of course politically, without the military. Please, let's agree on non-use of Article 5 on these two cases with Georgia. Let's behave like Western Germany. The Federal Republic has joined NATO, just as part of the German state and then in 1992/93 with its Eastern part. But friendly, it is not our job to make the public understand this correctly, because territory for the countries, especially for a country as small as Georgia, and of course Ukraine, is a very sensitive matter. We have gone from 2002 to two years ago, we have voiced that, it was not met with protest and so on. Definitely there are political forces, those who are against, opposing this concept. But in general it did not harm overall support for NATO integration. Ukraine has a lot time to convince their public, first, NATO aspiration is not that strong with the Ukrainians than it was in Georgia. Secondly, even if the pro-NATO aspirations were strong, they would need time for this idea to mature. I don't think it would be easy for them to claim that now. It is disappointing for me, and very damaging. For me, it is absolutely correct idea. Ukraine in NATO would be able to get back their territories. But out of NATO, even with strong support, frankly much less.

I: If Georgia was to seed these territories in order to join NATO, is there a fear that Russia could cause other problems to hinder this aspiration?

R: Of course, of course. None of these logical constructions are easy to understand or to realise, the concept of territorial integrity consists of many components and we have vulnerable territories, Armenians have settled in the South, Azeri in Tbilisi and so on. But what can we do, this is our fate, this is a challenge for us, and we have to meet this challenge? We need to think, to plan, we need to convince our public here and friends and allied in NATO and so on and move forward with a clear understanding that this is not an easy way. We will have much pain, many unpleasant moments, but this is only way for freedom.

I: What do you think Putin's ultimately goal is, his ultimate objective?

R: I don't know frankly; it is clear that his goal now is to create some kind of international coalition against America. It seems to be that he got a feeling that he can get an alliance with South Europeans, with rightist movements in Austria and Hungary and so on and so on. Although his experiments tests to cleave the Western societies has been successful, he has made it hard for the Western democracy. Not as large and destructive character, but, nevertheless. He has got a special relationship with Turkey, a major major NATO player and the very fact, I don't know what to call him, Erdogan, is ready to challenge America with Russian S300s really is very damaging, but now he is pampering China trying to get a friendship with the Chinese. I don't think this has any prospect to be successful. The Chinese are smart enough not to follow his way of direct challenging America, they are an economic force, primary source of their economic success. Putin is failing to understand this. His intellectual level is not enough to cover such complicated matters. Just last weekend at the St Petersburg economic forum, Putin in his statement, was attacking this globalism the globalist policies of the Americans and was referring to China, saying please, Mr Xi Ping, he supports us, that king of rhetoric. But Mr Xi Ping said very clearly 'no, globalism is in China's interest, we are betting on the economy. Without global trade there is no Chinese goods. Then of course, he continued with some reverences to Russia and Putin, but it was stated very clearly. That is why I don’t think Putin's strategy here has any chance of being successful. Nevertheless, his first goal is to show some harm to the Americans, in order to show Russian people that he is very strong, and he is fighting Goliath. The second and main strategy of course is to restore, Russia's strong, direct and unchallenged influence on the entire post-Soviet space. Probably to some extent, he will reconcile, the absence of the Baltic States, but all other territories belong to Russia as he sees it and this influence and ruling power should be restored. If he gets this, what else, I have no idea. The further it leads to a global confrontation, maybe not nuclear, but anyway, here he might lose everything, quite easily. To understand these things, some level of intellectual force is needed, which is lacking unfortunately.

I: Is Russia deliberately weakening its neighbours?

R: Russia is not scared, Russia does not fear any confrontation with post-Soviet states, he believes that there are enough proportions or parts of the elites to succeed or to work out successful strategy and to impose that influence I just talked about. Of course, NATO countries and China is another story, here he will have difference. With regards to the former Soviet territories, he will move on brazenly, it is not brave and fearless because all these definitions are positive. Let's see how he behaved in Syria for example, bombarding the peaceful population under the slogan of fighting IS. He will use quiet easily his military might. The overall situation is quite dangerous.

I: Do you think he could act against a NATO member?

R: No. I don't think so. In his future, Russia's economic and military ability is not helped. Too often he is bluffing, but his bluff is usually working in cases with much weaker advisories. He even was forced to swallow this blow from Turkey, when his plane was dumped. He started shouting but finally nothing. I don't think that his muscles are strong enough to make any move against a NATO state. More than that, If NATO makes a strong statement that they will protect Ukraine, even this will be very suffering for him. Not the very politically correct formulas used today, but the direct strong, messaging correctly and precisely the target.

I: Why has Russia conducted passportization in the Baltics?

R: Most probably the same goal. Just in case, if the situation allows, let's have their amount of people that he can refer to. I can't see any other reason, because all three countries are NATO members. I have no doubt that when they started these drills with Belarus, they will go further if there are not steps taken by NATO. Just put there their symbolic representation of NATO, but still and what is most important, is that America started to get back onto European soil, all those armaments they had withdrawn in the 90s. Tanks and so on. There was a huge stream of military delivery to Europe.

I: Do you think Putin needs to have this battle, this rivalry, in order to survive domestically?

R: Sure. Sure. Because he is not a smart guy. He is not strategically minded. He is smart enough to understand that he has no chance to confront these huge Western states in a fight in a real battle. But he has to have strong support domestically to continue, those nasty things that he and his friends are doing. Stealing billions and billions of dollars. He is not prepared to give it up.

I: Will they expand their practices further into other parts of Ukraine?

R: Difficult to say, because Ukraine has also changed. Of course, I cannot see that the Ukrainian army is ready to defeat Russia. There armed forces and what is even more important, is that their support of their Western allies and friends to Ukraine, they are incomparable to that in 2014. This is a very effective preventative factor. Of course the Ukraine army is still vulnerable if the Russian army mobilises, and pushes forward, but now there are some, not clear messages, but some signals that if he steps over a certain barrier, the West might react differently, just as in Georgia, but in another way. So all these developments may seem a bit more cautious, therefore I don't believe that he is and will be prepared to go further into Ukrainian territory. If something doesn't push him or press him in an illogical way, domestically or somewhere else. The internal psychological and political preparedness of the Russian elite is not enough to go further that way.

I: With regards to the Kremlin's Compatriot Policy, is Putin really interested in the people?

R: Do not make any mistake, there is no caring, do they care about someone’s future? Of course not. All this bla bla bla, is ideology needed for a certain purpose. Please have you noted that all these talks about sacred function of Crimea and Ukraine, disappeared. There is no more Russian world. It means they are simply careless about them. They have no ideological, spiritual basis for their policies. They are so cynical, what they want is to solve the immediately tactical problems they are facing, because of their simply foolish internal policies. Economically, political, security and so on. Public servants are grabbing billions of dollars openly. This is the only sacred thing in Russia. All these things about Christianity, and so on, has gone, they have exploited this for a while. Chewed and then spit out.

I: Russia has a big demographic problem. Could this expansion of citizenship be considered as means to address this?

R: There are much more talks about the means to solve this problem than real deeds. At this economic forum at St Petersburg, there were talks about the so-called national programmes to improve demography, national programme for healthcare, education and that and that. They have simply calculated that ruling elite in the economic departments have all stated that there is no chance to finance all these programmes, no way can we get these resources to make these programmes realistic. Even if no single cent is stolen if everything is used with purposes, resources are not enough. But there is another golden rule, half of this money will go somewhere. Do I see any prospect of them to improve anything? Including demography? Because demographic problem requires, resources, public support, political support and so on, it is a complicated job done together with the participation of all elements of society and what is most important is the resources. State and society have to pay for additional beds, additional for every baby to be born, where from? It is not my thesis, maybe not exact, but a correct citation of political figures and agencies at this forum. So I doubt that anything in the social sphere that will improve in Russia, at least any time soon.

I: Can dual citizenship be considered as a threat to national security?

R: What is the explanation, what is the reason?

I: Some have said that it makes it harder to govern a population when a large proportion of those people are citizens of a country with a confronting ideology.

R: Yes, but I wouldn't call it impossible and exclude it as an option. It would be very hard but anyway, it would require a much better designed state and social politics to make more cohesion and better designed structure. It is not easy at all but at the same time, to call it impossible would not be correct, something there.

I: Is there any way passportization could be prevented from an international legal perspective?

R: It should be. It should be so. Let's take this example. When a quite experienced diplomat, not just with a lengthy professional career, but those with serious training and serious achievements, in Russia. Allows himself to state that the Budapest memorandum in 1994 didn't refer to the obligation of signed parties, America, UK and Russia, to guarantee the territorial integrity in Ukraine, rather than the non-use of nuclear armaments against Ukraine, when such a person is making such a statement, what should the international community's reaction be? Have you heard any reaction from the US, or your foreign office? French or Japanese? This tall guy, by the way from Tbilisi, his father by the way was born here, is making such an idiotic statement, it means he is breaking the elementary, basic rules of international law, because it is clearly stated there. They guarantee the inviolability of the sovereign territory and the borders of Ukraine. This is way, unfortunately, it makes the entire world order a total mess. We have to admit that speaking to Russia, talking to Russia, about the language of the law, the legalities has no sense. They can refuse everything. It meant that if I am not mistaken that Bismarck said, when Russia signs something, it means the document is not worth the value of the paper it is signed on. The international community has to be strong enough to make such brazen guys, obey what they have to do, the obligations they have taken, there is no other way.

I: Why does Russia bother with the rhetoric?

R: I don't know? Probably nobody cares. This is the worst-case scenarios, but I have the feeling that everybody has bought it. There is no sense to it, this language. Because otherwise everything is becoming chaotic. Uncertainty is becoming overwhelming, no rule, no agreement, no contractual agreements. We are going back to the Cold War, even that time some papers had some values, but in the Russian case, it is no value.