*Information about interviewee:*

*Tengiz Pkhaladze is the advisor of the President of Georgia and the former secretary of Foreign Affairs. The Interview was conducted in Tbilisi, Georgia.*

*R= Respondent – Tengiz Pkhaladze*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: As you know, today I would like to discuss with you is passportization and the 2008 conflict with Russia.

R: The issue I’m working with quite long time since 2008 because you know Russia, you're absolutely right. This is instrumental Russian for importance and not because I think so you think so others Yeah. If you look at the annual review of Russian policy which is published annual by the MFA of Russia, you will find the so-called humanitarian dimension of Russian Foreign Policy, we are speaking about education, about culture, about media, about compatriots and so on so on. Doesn't matter you consider this as a foreign policy tool or not, Russians they think that it's a foreign policy so. When Putin came to the power, he changed the law and incorporate of Russian Federation about citizenship and it was originally it was there to craft it. The idea is that anyone who has a connection or feeling, which is very strange for lawyers because feeling is nothing in the law, of feelings or cultural sentiment towards the Russian either to Russia Federation or Soviet Union. He can apply for Russian citizenship. So, which is absolutely ambiguous, strange formulation, it means because you can’t measure feelings you can’t measure your personal attitude or cultural sentiments towards something so when we're talking about law we're talking about some philosophy. We're talking about law, which means that Russia is able to give pass to any kind of citizen to me or you or any others if you formerly apply and explain that you have this sentiment towards Russia and if they think that a person like me will be useful for them. This is one, another is that today Tskhinvali and Abkhazia they are occupied, they are officially recognized by Russia as independent. When the passportization process was under way both territories were recognised by Russia as an integrated part of Georgia and Russia was peacekeeping. And they have embassy in Tbilisi, so why I highlight these issues, because despite the fact that they recognise the independence of Georgia and territorial integrity, they introduced consular points in the process, directly engaged by the MFA of Russia. They stuck this process of passportization. I will send you a video. I have this short summary of this passportization process. Mobile groups travelled from village to village giving the passport to the population. So and what was the goal? The goal was to prepare for the one point was referendum about independence of Abkhazia but at the same time it was preparation for war 2008 because official reason why Russian invade was the way to protect the population so in Tskhinvali and in Abkhazia they already had 90% of their citizens, so-called citizens. So what is interesting, the absolutely identical scenario was repeated in Crimea. Absolutely same. So it's really case study because you can find the similarities in Moldova and Transnistria, in Crimea and Ukrainian but it starts from Georgia.

I: And now in Donbas.

R: Now in Donbas, absolutely. Absolutely the same.

I: So do you think Russia will ever attempt to formally or illegally but make official steps towards annexation Tskhinvali and Abkhazia?

R: Hard to say but as I know Russia. The Russians are always preparing for the different scenarios. They are not stupid. They are smart. They are sometimes crazy in their political decisions. But in the process of the implementation of their strategy and political order, they are not stupid. So they are preparing for the different scenarios, for instance, if tomorrow needs an annexation, which I don't think is the main goal for Russia, take into consideration all complications Russia has to face. International pressure, economic sanctions and so on so on. It's not an easy step to the annex one more territory, but they need these for any case for tomorrow to engage for the future invasion, for political engagement and so on, so on. If I have my citizens there and even if they are not a majority but the integral part of so-called communities, I have the obligation to protect. So that's why Russia are preparing for the different scenarios even if you remember in Donbas, it was the idea of Nova Russiya, but dual citizenship, Russia citizens on the ground it’s useful for any development but I don't think that they are ready for annexation right now. Actually they don’t need those territories. I mean Crimea was a little bit different issue, but actually Russians are, it's really strict in human history there were a lot of wars. War is always bad thing but there was kind of reason, even if they want territory or resources, or something, there should be kind of reason, yeah. Occupying Tskhinvali or villages in Tskhinvali it doesn’t solve, it doesn't make any solution for the problem Russia really faced today. They are not short on territory they have largest territory in the world, okay. Even if there is no gold, no oil, no gas. Even if we consider that they need as a land power access to the sea yeah which more or less reasonable, ok but today Black Sea is closed for international community so if you need access to the sea it means that you must develop something. So that’s why the only reason is to prevent Georgia, Ukraine for more close cooperation the West and somehow prevent development of the East-West corridor so this is beneficial for only Putin, not for Russia as a country but for Putin of course it's beneficial.

I: And has passportization changed the practical element of the conflict from a Georgian perspective?

R: No it was just an additional reason for Russia to legitimize their activities because Russians they always engaged from the very beginning 1982 even, even before. It was just, so from our perspective nothing because we never had conflict and it just additional to legitimize Russia's activities. Because reality is nobody believes that there are Russian citizens or this referendum was a real expression of people’s real free choice and so on, so on. But this is kind of, it’s true that Russia is trying to play and plus it’s additional leverage in Abkhazians and South Ossetian because when they're talking to those people and if you know we offer them status neutral documents and there is no obligation of citizen, nothing. This just gives them opportunity to travel to enjoy all benefits Georgia has today. So why is this passport leverage? Because Russians attitude is that if you accept status neutral documents, you will be punished. At the same time, they offer their passport so if people want to travel, they can use the Russian document. This was a kind of political leverage. They create the feeling that they are Russians, and they strengthen their ties with Moscow, with Russia, so this serious leverage. The passport is brings with it a Russian pension, and all the benefits of being a Russian citizen.

I: Is there an optimism in Georgia that you will one day regain control of these territories?

R: You know, on this territory at least in the last 3000 years we are between different empires. So we have experience. Yes and actually Georgia sometimes I think sometimes our partners they don't understand how successful the case is Georgia for NATO and for the EU because usually the story they are telling it is that Georgia was punished because of the choice to become a member of NATO and EU, which not true and why? Because the conflict in Georgia start before, we make this choice. In Tskhinvali it started in 1991 and in Abkhazia in 1992, I mean large scale conflicts. Complications we had in Soviet times, but large-scale conflicts with Russia's engagement it starts in very beginning of 90’s. The official statement that Georgia wants to join NATO was done in 2002 so when we made our statement our partners were aware that the Georgia has territorial problems. But our territorial problems and Russia’s invasion and so on, so on. Georgia succeeded and managed to really impressive reforms and from a post-Soviet country, it transformed let's say not very successful European country but European. So this is the success story that our country, despite occupation, despite foreign challenges and so on, so on. So if people want something, they can achieve it, so I think this understanding it's not this is not enough evaluated by intel or our partners.

I: And I heard one theory that in the future as a condition, if Russia said to Georgia you need to modify your constitution to prohibit future NATO membership, future EU membership //

R: // It doesn’t solve the conflict. Okay, let's start from the very beginning. Tedo and me and some of our friends we were from the very beginning of our independence, first days of our independence in the state service. So Tedo was in the MFA presidential staff and later he was Ambassador. I was presidential staff since 1992. So we are eyewitness of many things happened in this conflict. I would say that in 1994 Russians, as an answer to your question, in 1994 Russians are already involved in both conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Yeltsin came to Georgia. It was the only state visit of Russia presidents to Georgia. In 1994, we signed a package of documents about Russian military bases in Georgia and about economic cooperation. Georgia agreed to become a member of CIS. Georgia also agreed to become a member of the CSTO and we agreed to Russia's military base. Neither of those documents helped us to make even the minor progress towards the occupied territories so that is why talking about the territory or NATO is not the right comparison. Once again, the conflict started earlier than when we made our official statements that we wanted to join European Union and NATO. So if tomorrow Georgia say that okay we stop our Western integration, first of all I think it's impossible because of public demand it is not government choice but even if we imagine that people will change their mind and don’t think that somehow switches with Russians, maybe I mean if we are talking about territories. Because first of all we have great example Ukraine but plus Russia's goal is maintaining stability in those regions, or having entire region as their part, maybe not part of the country but part of zone of influence. Because Russia's attitude is where our problems start because we decide to be independent, so it was the main problem. Okay If you want to be independent so every choice has its own consequences so guys you will have a problem. So it was very blunt. Russians by the way they are very outspoken so that's why all this rhetoric about Georgia’s Western integration makes problem to Russia I can't believe it because first of all i don't think that Russia is afraid that tomorrow Georgia became so strong to be an aggressor and to start a war with Russia, that’s impossible. And I don't think they’re afraid that Georgia troupe on Russian soil. Vice versa I think that if we're talking about countries, nations, not about Putin's influence or interests. When you have so big complications you need strong predictable democratic country nearby your Southern border. So strong Georgia it's kind of guarantee for Russia if complications start in the North Caucasus and Russia’s have this challenge. And if we compare Georgia’s situation for instance with the Baltic states remember those borders Baltic States, Poland and so on, it was a great opportunity for contraband, for smuggling for drugs and so on and so on, until they became a member of EU and NATO. So now they have the most protected borders from European side because all those countries they became democratic, free, they have integral control, border control, they have modern technologies and Russia’s afraid that something will happen from that side of their territory. so less criminal, less contraband, less drugs and so on so on. So that's why this is all a benefit And you'll remember that before Crimea, Russia his beautiful relationship with NATO countries including trade relations, military cooperation. So I really don’t think that NATO is the threat for Russia. The problem is that Putin needs kind of an idol to show the population look we should stay united. I can't give you some reforms or developments or reconstruction of the roads. I don’t know, have you been in Russia, not Moscow and not Saint Petersburg?

I: I took the Trans Mongolian. I’ve been through Siberia.

R: So you know what does it mean Russian village? The general Russian village.

I: Yeah.

R: Yeah? So how are you going to maintain those people you need some foreign enemy as an idol to show them that we have to stay strong, and united and so. Do you remember in 2005, Russia became a member of G8, it was a strong demand from the German side? The idea was that give those guys the opportunity, because they really have this ambition to be recognised as a strong power and this chance was given to Russia. Guys, okay. You are welcome to the club. Please join us. And in 2005 it was the G8 summit in St Petersburg. So from the right beginning, Putin considered this as his victory, yes, I am in the club, I am the strong guy. But later he discovered yeah okay you are in the club, but you can't offer anything, you can't afford it because this is the club of very well-off countries. I want to be billionaire, but I’m not billionaire. Because tomorrow if I’m invited to a billionaire club, everyone will discover that I’m not a billionaire. So, he had the kind of feeling that whoa, those guys are stronger, and the decision was that okay, if I can’t be a general member of our club because I’m not strong. I can be a strong troublemaker for you, and you need to anyway talk to me, and I can make trouble everywhere, I can engage everywhere. They start trouble in Georgia, in Ukraine, in the elections and so on. So yes, Putin is the biggest troublemaker today. I don't like this, but many leaders they respect because he's a troublemaker. When I saw Putin, last time, Paris of this piece forum, and I observed how those leaders of many countries they are looking, their eyes, oh Mr. Putin so he was like a strong guy in the room. So, we should respect, we shouldn't ignore Russia, we should understand Russia.

I: And going back to passportization, it is it illegal?

R: Is it illegal? Not because I think it’s illegal that’s why I mentioned the process starts off so usually according international law you have official consular section in the country, people they can apply but this process was against this role. So They opened a so-called mobile point, consular points on the occupied territories on uncontrolled territories without the permission of host country. According to international law, if you are going to open consular point of any representative, you need permission of the host country. So that time, Russian, in both territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia was recognized by Russia as a part of Georgia so in this case Georgia's permission was necessary. So entire process was wrong. I mean it's not about politics it's about the law. So if you judge according to international law, the process was illegal, so all other things are just rhetoric and politics but according to the law it wasn't.

I: And for the citizens, the Russian citizens in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, are they considered equal as other Russian citizens in Russia under the law? Or is there like a grading of occupied territories' citizens?

R: Good question, so actually there are two types of citizens. Russian citizens who moved in Abkhazia after 2008. It is part of the policy of Russia to artificially change the balance of the population because Abkhazians never were in majority in this territory. So the one goal is to change artificially change the balance and of course those people that moved from Russia, enjoy full powers and full benefits of a Russia citizen, but people in Abkhazia who became Russian citizens, they are kind of limited for instance, I can't imagine they can be elected in the Russian Duma. This is just an opportunity for financial support, this is an opportunity for kind of medical care if they need treatment, they go to Moscow or any other city, they will be treated as any other Russian citizen. It gives the opportunity to travel abroad, but as I know they but I need to check the have only foreign passports not the internal documents because internal document, but they had this in the 90’s, but not now so they have just it's pretty similar to Russian citizens living abroad. I mean who have genuine dual citizenship. They can be part of Russian community, but they have some limitations. Because for instance to be elected or to take some position and so on you need to live in Russia and so it's pretty similar to this position.

I: And when I when I look at this Compatriot Policy and Russian rhetoric on who is included who isn’t, it seems to be contradictory, often confused. Is their policy a humanitarian one? Are they trying to attract people to move to Russia to solve their demographic problem? Is it an ethnic issue?

R: It would be understandable if they had so that they are going to solve demographic problems but there is no sign that they are going to do it. Vice versa, they are interested to have those people outside of Russia, to keep them in Abkhazia, Crimea, Tskhinvali. So they need those people there, they don't need Abkhazians in Russia, they need those people there. And usually, I mean, when you are talking about soft power, yeah. It should be language, values and so on so on. It’s absolutely different how Russia could consider this because you would if you just walk and see a situation. The Russia consular in Tbilisi, you will see how Russian, genuine ethnic Russians, they are suffering to get visa, to get citizenship and so on. Ethnic Russians. People from other ethnicities, if they are politically loyal towards Russia. They haven't such complications. So that that's different. So that's why I think it's a really humanitarian and noble idea. Once again, it doesn’t solve any kind of problem for Russia. They need those people outside of Russia, not inside.

I: And I understand in January this year, Georgia amended the constitution to allow for dual citizenship?

R: Yeah. It was quite a long time ago, I mean, Georgia has dual citizenship but for Georgians, the ethnic Georgians, the procedure is easier. If the ethnic Georgian’s who left Georgia either in Soviet times or after because of complications, they had. They still have ties with the country Georgia so people leaving Georgia so and they can prove this, they can apply.

I: And when I travelled through the Baltic States as part of my fieldwork trip.

R: It’s different, they have citizenship and they have non-citizens.

I: Many people I met from the Ministry of Interior or foreign affairs would say that dual citizenship is a national security threat

R: Yeah. Yeah. Because they have almost a lot is almost 43% to 45% of Russians. And the problem is that those people want to be part of genuine Latvian society. it’s a problem for language, they have opportunity to learn Latvian language, they still prefer to talk only Russian. If you are in a country, you have to respect local language and tradition and rule on so on. That’s real complication so they have this. If you are travelling, I could connect you with people that are working with these kinds of issues.

I: That'd be great yeah because I met with a few people I met with the mayor of Daugavpils and 90% of his town are Russian speaking.

R: Yes there are some good experts. I will send you a link which will explain many things. In 2009 actually the Baltic countries, together with Moldova and Ukraine which conduct research study about the Humanitarian dimension of Russian Foreign Policy, so Compatriot Policy, education issues, culture and so on.

I: Thank you. And Putin announced that he’s supposedly going to step down during this term. Do you think that he will and if he does will things change?

R: Months ago Nazarbayer stepped down, do you think it’s real? Yeah so, it’s not a democratic system. I mean if Putin steps down he needs some very very strong guarantees and he will stay maybe not as an official leader but like once again, Nazerbayer stepped down months ago, he’s leader of nation, he has a semi-official position, and they have new president and the change of the name of the city, Astana became Nur-Sultan. That’s the Soviet’s style of understanding because you know Putin and those people, they know what was done in the wrong way, they know how many people waiting for the momentum. And of course they are afraid of many not just one but of political opposition and many others. Because the power today Putin enjoys the consolation of legal power, plus oligarchs, plus illegal business plus criminal, so all together. So he is responsible not towards his citizens as an elected leader. He's responsible for accounts, he's accountable to criminals, political criminals like Ramzan Kadyrov and others. People engaged in dirty business. So, it’s not an easy deal to step down. So Putin today he is a hostage of his success. Because this is, he belongs to a system it’s not easy.

I: There seems to be a paradox looking at Russia, with regards to legal mechanisms, on the one hand, they're very, very careful. Very careful to say well, we've done things by our interpretation of law, passportization, very technical. The other hand, they're breaking international laws and norms.

R: It’s quite usual in a country like Russia, because usually in democratic countries the main principle is the law, and everything served to the people. In Russia it’s a little bit different. Everything serves to the legal. So if tomorrow Putin wants to change something, he will change the law. He will change the law if he thinks that for his power for his system, and so on, he needs some additional legalities or a different constitution. He will change the law so it’s a genuine law-making process that democratic countries enjoy, everything depends on the political will of one person. That’s the point.

I: Do you envision that he will continue expanding to other parts of Ukraine or other parts of the former Soviet Union?

R: I think that he is looking for opportunities. The attitude of Russia is that. So the problem is that Russians they define those countries as sphere of influence as their backyard. If they see there's something going wrong, they will engage but once again, Russia’s goal is to maintain this instability. They're not so strong to annex additional territories but they will make problems everywhere. Not only in post-Soviet countries. They would be happy to make problems in central Europe, Spain in Catalonia and elsewhere.

I: And do you think Putin is genuinely fearful of NATO?

R: He’s not stupid. He knows what it is, NATO. Actually, he loves NATO. And I mean, because this is the Soviet political paradigm is black and white. So if you haven't, Soviet Union disappear as soon as Soviet bloc and Western bloc they became partners. So they need enemy, 'oh my god they are preparing to attack us!' and people believe it in Russia. Georgia is going to join NATO, so what? I mean what does it mean Georgia wants to join NATO, Georgia will be more secure, more predictable. More accountable and a reliable partner, what else? Nothing?

I: If I could ask one more question?

R: Yeah sure.

I: What is the ultimate goal? In the Kremlin, is it written on a piece of paper ‘We want the Soviet Union back’ under the Russian control?

R: Actually Putin said so, he said so. The dissolution is Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe in the 20th century. Yes, they somehow want these. But today for the regime is unsure and insecure of their political future. That is a problem. They are not able to transform country to deliver something to solve the real problem. The problem Russia has today - demography, economy, corruption, criminal, reforms. So they can't solve this. So if you can't solve this, you need something else a different style of government to keep those people together. That is why they need a foreign enemy. So this is the question. Not about the country, but about the political issue, to ensure future for his political vision for the corruption. We are not talking about millions; we are talking about billions.

I: Yeah. It must be so expensive for Russia to cause all this instability on their borders.

R:This is the great opportunity to make money. Because nobody counts money when there is a war. You can easily legitimate any kind of expenses. So it's, it's not about it's not about the principles. It’s about the money.