*Information about interviewees:*

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*R1= Respondent 1 – Giorgi Khelashvili*

*R2= Respondent 2 - Nikoloz Samkharadze*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

## I: Dual citizenship is prohibited in Georgia.

## R1: Yes it was prohibited, but nobody was checking unless it was a political issue.

## R2: No. I will tell you how it was. So the new wording says that the citizenship of other countries by the Georgian nationals is determined by the organic law, so this is a new wording of the constitution which allows dual citizenship. Before that it was, according to Georgian constitution, once you acquired another nationality, you would automictically lose your Georgian nationality, but then you could ask the Georgian president to restore your citizenship and it was in the discretion of the Georgian president to grant you the Georgian citizenship or reject. Many Georgians that emigrated in the 90s to the West and later they decided to restore their Georgian citizenship, they would apply to the Georgian president for that. That was the case. Now it is different, now it is allowed. However, now it is still the same procedure that if you get Georgian citizenship you automatically lose your Georgian citizenship.

## I: Restoring has become easier.

## R2: Restoring has not become easier. It is not now the sole discretion of the president. Now you have to take exams in Georgian history and Georgian language and this committee in the ministry of Justice will decide whether you are eligible for citizenship or not, but if you, let's say, pass the exam and language and history, then the committee does not have any leverage to reject you. Unless you have any criminal convictions or fighting against Georgian territorial integrity.

## I: It is quite clear that Russia has used passportization as a foreign policy instrument?

## R2: I think the simple answer is that they do this to have their own people on the ground, which are loyal to them, they pay their pensions, they pay their salaries, they pay their social security. Then, when they have some concerns against the current government, they may hold protests or demonstrations and then Russia can use it as a pretext to protect its own citizens from barbaric local governments and interfere.

## R1: Genocide. It probably also has to do with a very peculiar understand of international law with regards to Russia. If you follow what they do they make sure that in each case they interfere or use military force, it is properly, it can be very casuistic, it is properly underpinned, undergirded, by the letter of international law. This was deliberate. As far as I remember, it started in Georgia's case in 2002, and maybe even earlier, it was just a design, we give them passports and they are our citizens and in case it becomes necessary to intervene, we can use them as a pretext. They would have intervened anyway, probably, but it was to make sure that the action would have been justified by international law.

## R2: That is the international side of it. There is also an internal side of it. If you look at Russian citizenship laws starting in the 90s. In the 90s they were with open arms welcoming every ethnic Russian that was coming from the union's republics. Then in the mid-90s this policy kind of ceased then there was a policy that meant it was very hard to get Russian citizenship. From the early 2000s with the rise to power of Putin, he started to give out passports to the citizens of the break-away republics. It happened not only in Georgia but also in Moldova. Then in the late 2000s, they went back to the policies of the 90s, and said that every citizen that was born in the territory of the Soviet Union, would be eligible to become a Russian citizen. Even me and George could become Russian citizens, we just need to prove we were born in the Soviet Union, which is very easy to prove, and we also need to have some knowledge of the Russian language. They are trying to broaden their sphere of influence with this citizenship policy in order to tell every former Soviet Union citizen, look we care about you. It is not only a foreign policy tool to fight against, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, but it is also a charm offensive to win the hearts of the former Soviet peoples that Russia is still your mother land.

## R1: The same is happening in places like Syria, that despite how much it costs politically to support local leaders, they are allies.

## I: Did passportization change the conflict?

## R2: I wouldn't say so. To some extent it has changed, because getting Russian citizenship, as I said you are eligible to get Russian pensions, salaries, social assistance. In that regard it created a wall between the Georgians and the non-Georgians who became Russian citizens. It made it more difficult to restore competence and to have these people incorporated into the Georgian system. In that regard, yes. In terms of conflict resolution as such, I don't think it had a big impact. Politically it did not, before the war, when it was used as a pretext to invade, this did not have a larger impact on the resolution process.

## R1: I would agree, that those policies were more of a signal to the locals who resisted Georgian and normalisation of relations with Georgian. You had factions and the faction that was usually cooperative would get very disheartened, because then Russians were offering something real to the other faction, which was pro-independence, pro-secession, pro-unification with Russia. In that sense it complicated dialogue between Georgia and the locals, the Ossetian and Abkhazians. Also it made it more difficult to negotiate or persuade them to make peace on Georgian terms. Ultimately it was a policy to either keep status quo or actually use it against Georgia.

## I: Why didn't Russia attempt to annex these territories?

## R2: Because they don't need them.

## R1: You mean after 2008?

## I: Yes.

## R2: This would be, as George said, they are trying to be normative and they try, in every decision they make, they try to underpin this decision with the letter of international law. What they are saying right now is that Abkhazia and South Ossetia, that because of the war, it was the same case as the Kosovo case, and therefore we had all the right to recognise them as independent states and this is fine with international law, that is what they are saying. If they would annex those territories, that would not be ok with international law, and this would be another headache for Russia vis-a-vis the west. Let’s leave aside this international law and look at the practicality of it. South Ossetia, there are only 20-25000 people remaining in that territory. It is effectively a big Russian military base and the people who live there are either serving on Russian military bases or getting pensions and salaries from the Russian Federation. So it is completely dependent on the Russian Federation. We can almost say the same for Abkhazia, but given the size and location of Abkhazia, Abkhazia has more independence than South Ossetia, but they are still dependent on the Russian Federation. Russia does not need those territories to be annexed to Russia, because they need it exactly to leverage Georgia and to prevent Georgia from joining any other Western alliance, that is why they created those two puppet states. The same thing happened in Ukraine, the exact same thing was copied and pasted from here to there, they are now using those territories as trump cards in their hands, vis-a-vis Georgia. Georgia is the key to the Caucasus, if Russia loses Georgia, they lose Armenia and Azerbaijan, in terms of spheres of influence. They also had troubles in the North Caucasus as well. So they will never annex South Ossetia and Abkhazia because they don't need those territories as part of the Russian Federation, they need those territories to balance Georgia’s Western integration.

## I: To create more obstacles.

## R2: To create more obstacles for Georgia's Western integration.

## R1: It has basically exactly those three things. One is military practically, if you look at the base in South Ossetia and the base in Gyumri in Armenia it is basically has Georgia in between, right now the geography of the whole thing, it is very easy to squeeze the remaining part of Georgia from two places, in case they need to. In the law part and practically, if you look at Georgian and Russia interaction over these territories from the early 90s, Russia is getting more and more power over these territories in the last 30 years or so. Initially Russia even had, it was really disregarded as everyone forgot about it, that Russia actually exercised a blockade, and economic embargo of Abkhazia until 1997. Why they ceased to do it, was because Georgia in that year declared that they wanted to be part of this Western world, and also the pipeline politics stuff. That was the year Russia said, okay, so you don't want to be part of us, so then we are opening up Abkhazia to our products and that is when they abolished the blockage and then you just follow it, passportization, recognition of impendence and annexation, i think that they might annex these territories, but it would be a major punishment for what Georgia does. For example if we are coming very close to NATO, they can simply take it, as the only thing they can retain as a minimum.

## I: Is there a confidence about regaining these territories?

## R1: Not at the moment.

## I: Have these occupations created a greater solidarity in the rest of Georgia?

## R1: No.

## R2: No. Georgia and Ukraine are different countries. Georgia never had this identity problem, like Ukrainians had, because Georgian history of independence dates back to 1st or 2nd Century. Whereas Ukrainian state as such never existed in the history, so we did not have that problem that the war with Russia kind of solidified our identity. With that regard we are very different from Ukraine. We are looking back at our glorious golden age of King David and Queen Tamar in 12 and 13th Century, so we did not have that issue. So in that case, in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, what it did was strengthen Georgians antagonism towards Russia. But it did not solidified Georgians sense of national identity.

## R1: Something else did. If you look at the case of Abkhazia, in the first place I think that there is a little optimism, it means in the next few years, but if you look at the borders with Russia, they are pretty fluid. Influence comes and go. Russia is a relatively newcomer to the region and they could actually lose the North Caucasus in the next few decades. Nobody knows that. In that case the headache is not regaining these territories, the headache is the North Caucasus which is a very dangerous place.

## R2: Which has always been a threat to Georgian statehood.

## R1: Yes more than Russia. Not as an empire but as an unruly, completely uncontrollable territory. The empire like the Ottomans, like the Russians, used them against us. The Ottomans did exactly what the Russians are doing now, historically, they would push the Chechens, Dagestan to come and devastate the richer parts of Georgia in the 18th Century, to the state that region was depopulated, and they would sell Georgians on the Istanbul slave market. The Russians are doing the same thing.

## R2: South Ossetian were always integrated, totally, into the life of the GSSR. Abkhazia as an autonomous republic always looked to Russia and Ukraine, they would go, most of the students, once they graduated from high schools, would not go to Tbilisi to study, they would go to Moscow to Kiev, that was the trend.

## I: What is the Kremlin's ultimate goal?

## R2: The ultimate goal is to restore the Soviet Union, but they are perfectly aware that it is not possible at this stage, because first of all they don't have the economic resources for that. So therefore with their limited resources, they are trying to at least keep their zone of influence in the former Soviet territories, if possible, to project this influence into the former socialist territory which is eastern Europe, part of the Balkans, some middle Eastern countries. that is their Grand Strategy. Today they don't want to lose their influence over their former Soviet. There are concentric circles, this circle is Russia, this circle is the rest of the Soviet Union and this circle is the Warsaw pact countries and I think that this is their strategy, to have all of those under their influence. In that geo-political aim, the European Union is their main rival and that is why they are trying to dig from beneath to make European Union non-existent. In the neighbourhood, they are instigating their ethnic conflicts, ok in Georgia you could speak about ethnic conflict, in the Abkhazia it goes back hundreds of years. In Ukraine there was no ethnic conflict, people on both sides of the line are the same ethnicity. Even in Moldova, it was not an ethnic conflict, it was a political conflict. They have instigated those conflicts, and in each one of those conflicts, they are now the mediator. So the key to resolution of these conflicts, is not in Brussels or Washington, but in Moscow. The same goes for Karabakh. Russia is not directly involved, but both Armenia and Azerbaijan are proxies of Russia. Russia has taken them as hostage. Neither could move. Because if any of them move radically to the west, they know they will be punished from Russia in Karabakh. That is how they are trying to maintain their influence in this area.

## I: How is coming from Putin himself?

## R2: That is a good question. Putin came to power on 1st January 2000. This Russian game has been played out here in the region since 1991. So it is not Putin's game. It is a game that has been planned long ago, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I think that the people in the Kremlin realised pretty early that the Soviet Union was going to be dissolved and they had to come up with a plan B, and this is their plan B. Putin is just a good implementor or executioner of this.

## R1: It is about preventing American hegemony at any price, that was formulated in the 90s. All things are instruments to resist domination of the West and unions with China. Cooperation with them. There is a parallel doctrine that I think closely belongs to Putin, and that is the near abroad sphere of influence. These two might not necessarily be compatible, they might be at some point, stopping Western domination and boosting sphere of influence. Sometimes they can be compatible, but when it comes to where you put your energy, they are pretty much mutually exclusive. This is a big topic that everybody in the world has an opinion about. When it comes to Putin contribution to, I think he is less of an imperialist, in a classic sense of it, not a negative sense, but as Russia as an empire, he is a narrow nationalist and he would prefer to have his own carved up sphere of influence and disregard the large world politics.

## R2: I would add that he is a realist and he understand that he does not have enough resources, to stand up to the West everywhere. So he prefers to narrow down his ambitions and to be most effective when he can be most effective in this neighbourhood. I would agree with Georgia, that Putin is more nationalist, but because of the economic base that he has. If you want these countries to be in a union with Russia, then you have to offer them something, and Russia does not have anything to offer these countries other than cheap gas price and this is not something that would be a carrot for those countries. Azerbaijan can offer it even cheaper. There he has a fundamental problem.

## R1: Which he makes up with a stick and blackmailing them.

## R2: That is how it is different from the Soviet times. In the Soviet times they could go and support Cuba, Vietnam, Mozambique, building roads, dams, ports giving them ammunition, arms. Now they cannot do that anymore, because they don't have enough financial resources.

## I: Is the apparent expansionism behind Russian's citizenship policy simply a rhetorical devise, or does the Kremlin really wish to grant citizenship to everyone in the former Soviet Union?

## R2: There is one more thing we forgot to mention that Russia is facing a huge demographic problem. All the resources that could have been drawn from the former Soviet Union, in ethnic Russians, almost all ethnic Russians have left from Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltic states, everyone who left has left. Still Russia’s demographic balance is negative, more people emigrate than immigrate. So of course, this compatriot policy is not only a foreign policy tool, but it is a domestic policy tool. They need more people, they need more workforce to support their economy, they want to get highly qualified people to come and work in Russia, because nobody wants to go, if you are highly qualified you don't want to go to Russia, you want to go to the European Union if you are from this region. They are kind of offering these people from the former Soviet Union to become Russian citizens in order to kind of balance the demographic problem also. On the foreign affairs side of it, as we spoke about, they want to be seen as the caretaker, they want to promote this Russkiy Mir idea. That everyone who lived in the big brotherly and friendly country of the Soviet Union that they all belong together. If you watch the Russian media channels, they always praise those old glory days of the Soviet Union. They are trying to bring up this nostalgic event, how nice it was that you could go to Abkhazia for example and have your vacations together with people from other republics, the Turkmens and Estonians were living together in the same country. This is their policy. They are saying that those are the good old times. It was not our fault; it was the fault of the imperialist. Still there is this strange mix, of Russian nationalist, communist, and orthodox blend of ideologies. On the one hand they are trying to promote Russian and orthodox nations and they reach out to Georgians, Ukrainians and others saying we are brothers in Christ. Then there comes this communist ideology, that the Soviet Union used to be one of the superpowers in the world, and that we made the Soviet Union a super-power together.

## R1: I think it is more anti-colonialist rather than communist or anti-imperial.

## R2: Yes. The third one is this sense of belonging together. In some countries they are quite successful with that because this Soviet, there has not been a major shift in most of the countries that I have to, from this Soviet society to a modern society. Georgia is one of the exceptions along with the Baltic countries, but even with the Baltic countries, you see, we call this, the Soviet man. You have this mentality of the Soviet person, in most of those countries, that is when Putin comes and talks about the Compatriot Policy, of course this is very appealing to this Soviet man. This Soviet man is not only people in their 50s, 60s, 70s, they are also people in their 30s or 40s. So this generational, or mentality revolution, mental revolution has not happened in this space. I think it is not because we are Georgians, but we think that we are one of the most advanced, of course, we have people in society who think that the old days are good, but we are the most advanced in these countries.

## I: Is there an ethnic component underlying the Compatriot Policy?

## R1: Of course. There is an ethnic component and lack of ideology. In Soviet times, communism was the uniting ideology and when they were reaching out to Uzbeks and Kazaks it was communism and not the Russian let's say Russian superpower or Russian orthodoxy that was appealing to them. It was bringing these Uzbek peasants and giving them schools, theatres, cinemas and paved roads etc. Now this ideology is absent from international policy, because communism is not a uniting ideology and that is very hard for Russians to reach out to Uzbeks who now overwhelmingly don't speak Russian anymore, the same goes for Kazaks.

## R2: There was this big change by Stalin about a century ago, when he introduced his nationality policy, which was a dramatic departure from the Czarist policy, who said we are all Russians we are all orthodox. Stalin s approach was divide and rule, that is what now makes it complicated. Putin actually, at some point last year, there was this policy, about enforcing Russians in school, when they started to phase out teaching in local languages in high schools and elsewhere. Now there is a realisation that what a big mistake and headache was Stalin's nationalities policy. Which was emancipatory and it dove with the Soviet view of the world, self-determination, emancipation and so on. it was a Pandora's box and now it is very difficult to put everything back in the box and now he is in despair, because he cannot manage that huge question, tries to start at least this very long term project of Russification, but that does not eliminate the question of how he deals with the nations that escaped from it. And if you notice, he has the biggest problems exactly with the two orthodox nations, Georgians and Ukrainians, which means that even without religious differences, it is very difficult to speak to the Russians.

## I: Could the passportization in Armenia be considered a potential problem for Georgia?

## R2: It used to be.

## R1: Well i think passportization as such is not a problem.

## R2: It is axillary.

## R1: It is auxiliary to Nagorno-Karabakh, I mean there has been a big hype about the new Armenian government coming into power and Pashini being a democrat and trying to reform the country. But in terms of foreign policy, he is in a dead end. When we go on visits to the West, they always ask whether Armenia will change its foreign policy. Of course not, Armenia will never change its foreign policy course, because Armenian statehood today, is dependent on the Russian Federation. Even if they wanted to, they could play games with the European Union, they could now sign this truncated association agreement, which is not an association agreement but cooperation agreement, with the EU. They will never change their foreign policy course, unless Georgian becomes a member of NATO and Armenia will sneak in together with Georgia into NATO, but that is a fantasy for today. Even if they wanted, they are too much dependent on Russian, because of Nagorno-Karabakh and because of economic relations. There are more than one million Armenian living in Russia and Armenia is third I think from the Soviet Republics. First is Tajikistan, Second, Kurdistan, Third, Armenia which gets almost ten percent of its GDP from remittances from Russia. There was a story, I can tell you, in 2014 when Georgia, Ukraine, Georgian, Moldova and Armenia, that were supposed to sign this Vilnius declaration, the thing why Maiden happened. Two weeks before that, Armenia was ready to sign, Putin called in the former president of Armenia, for a rendezvous in Moscow. After that meeting, they gave a joint press conference, and said that Armenia would not sign an association agreement with the EU. You can guess what the talk in that meeting was.

## R2: Yes, talk. [laughs]

## I: Can you see dual citizenship being a threat to national security?

## R1: Yes of course. In this part of the world, the examples that we have clearly demonstrate that the dual citizenship can be used as a pretext for breaching your territorial integrity. So therefore, one should be very cautious about granting citizenship to people of other ethnicities, that could be used or misused by Russia, for creating problems, it might not be necessary for territorial conflicts, but they could use them for causing disturbances, unrest, riots.

## I: On a practical level, does it make it harder to govern a population where a large percentage of a population have another state's citizenship?

## R1: It is a matter of loyalty also. To which state are these citizens more loyal to? When it comes to drafting, in all our countries there is a military draft. Obviously, you cannot draft a single person to two armies. To which army would this person chose to go to? That is a problem. Double taxation, where would this person prefer to be taxed? Where would he want to have his permeant residence? There are many practical issues, when you leave aside national security aspect of it, there are also practical issues.

## I: There appears to be an increasing tolerance towards dual citizenship globally. Why do you think this is so?

## R1: In Georgia, I cannot talk about other examples, but in Georgia the case is that since the 90s, almost one-third of our population has migrated to other countries. Now there are also children that are born in migration. The Idea is that we should not close the doors to those people migrated because of economic hardship when the Soviet Union collapsed. So it they feel Georgian and they want to have Georgian citizenship they should be able to get it. However, there are certain hurdles, and those hurdles are that if you identify as a Georgian, then you need to speak Georgian and they need to know some basics of our history, our culture, our tradition. That's it. With that, I think, we opened the way for migrant Georgians to restore their Georgian citizenship. Now they, for example, an Italian cannot become Georgian citizen, straight away, unless he drops his Italian citizenship. So this special dual citizenship clause, is for those, who were once Georgian citizens and then lost their Georgian citizenship.

## I: Do you believe Putin has another target in mind?

## R2: Have you tried a quantitative research, where he tries to do that, that would be very very interesting? To see where these things occurred and what were the common characteristics. If you find some common characteristics, then there is a deliberate strategy behind them. If it is random...

## R1: There are two major vulnerable points. One is Kazakhstan, but they are not behaving badly for Putin, so they are fine at this moment, where Russians have a sizeable Russian speaking minority. It would be for them, very easy for them to stir up an ethnic tension. Another potential hotbed is Latvia where they have a sizeable ethnic minority. But in contrast with Kazakhstan, Latvia is an EU and NATO member, so it would be very hard to that.

## R2: There is one, excuse my French, there is a Georgian expression, to 'play one's arse'. Which means when you are dodgy or disobedient and you have your ways, I think Putin uses that policy, that when he sees one country misbehaving, trying to escape the orbit, apparently, surprising Belarus you might be in that category. If you look at when Putin tried to do those things, it was not in countries that were solidly in the other bloc, in Eastern Europe, who were disobedient or misbehaving, but somewhere in between. That I think is Belarus. If Belarusians are serious about development, then they have to escape Russian obedience at some point, and at the initial stage of that policy and that is at the initial stage of that policy, Russians might try to instigate something.

## R1: But in Belarus it would be hard to create this type of problem in Belarus.

## I: It is somewhat confusing, analysing Russian intent.

## R2: It is the most difficult thing to detect a pattern in behaviour. It is a challenging subject because you are trying to find a larger pattern from a very specific peculiar policy decision.

## R1: Basically what you are exploring now is this Russkiy Mir concept and how this Russkiy Mir concept is translated into citizenship policy and the passportization policy and how this is used as foreign policy tool, right?

## I: Is this correct. I have that in Abkhazia the population are pretty unhappy with how things have gone?

## R1: Yes, Yes. Well Abkhazia is a typical failing state, without international recognition, without investment, without any economic development, just a lifeline from Russia to survive. That's it. Even though they have a very big potential, they have very big tourism potential, agricultural potential. Even Russians are not investing in Abkhazia, it is a non-recognised state. Even they recognise that it would not be profitable for them to invest. I mean, what would happen to Abkhazia, nobody knows, they might be just traded in for hypothetically for Georgia not joining NATO or collective security arrangement in 7 or 10 years. That would require a change in the Georgian constitution. It would require a change in the Georgian mindset. However, Abkhazian is a very big trump card in the hands of the Russians. I really doubt it, but if they, one day, someone says, take back your Abkhazia and say no to NATO, I think that the big majority of Georgians would support that.

## R2: If it was credible promise.

## R1: Yes if that’s credible. Especially with those three hundred thousand people that are living in camps around Georgia, who are IDPs and have their own houses there.

## I: Do you think the situation is similar with Ukraine in that regard?

## R1: In Ukraine it is more difficult because in Ukraine, they have Crimea which is annexed and Russians are never going to give it back. Here they still left these territories in limbo that could be traded when the time comes.