

# Transforming Georgia

An Interview with  
His Excellency Irakli Garibashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia

**EDITORS' NOTE** Irakli Garibashvili graduated from the Tbilisi State University (TSU) with a degree in International Relations in 2004 and obtained a master's degree in International Relations in 2005. He also studied at the Sorbonne University in Paris. He became Prime Minister of Georgia in November of 2013 after serving as Minister of Internal Affairs. He is the Chairman and a founding member of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia political party. From 2007 to 2012, he was a member of the Supervisory Board of JSC Cartu Bank, and from 2009 to 2012, he was Director of the Georgian Dream music label. In 2006, he was the personal representative of the Honorary Consul of San Marino to Georgia and from 2005 to 2012, he was the Head of the Board of Administrators and General Director of Cartu International Charity Fund.

**How critical is your focus on transforming Georgia to a democratic Western modern state and what are the key initiatives in that regard?**

I grew up during the dark days of the Soviet Union and I remember that difficult period well.

I went to Europe to continue my political science studies in Paris because I had always been interested in politics. I always had a feeling that there was something I could do to make things better. It's a great privilege to serve one's country and to do good things for one's people and one's nation.

When I was studying in Paris, I became more in touch with European democratic values.

We now have a unique chance to transform our country into a real European state. Over the past 20 years, the country has gone through a difficult transformation period. We experienced civil war and a war with Russia in 2008. The country is still recovering from a number of human rights violation cases over the past 10 years.

Over the past two years, we have taken decisive steps to break the vicious cycle of government corruption, impunity, and an economy that only benefited a few. We have created a true democracy with a system of governance that is more open and accountable, and upholds the rule of law.

We have established a social compact that rewards work and enterprise while offering support for those in need.



H.E. Irakli Garibashvili (right) being interviewed by LEADERS President David Schmer

Our people desire real development and democracy, so this is the time for a real transformation of our country to a European state.

**Are the people ready for this type of change and how are you measuring the impact of it?**

The people want change. They were ready to change the previous government democratically, and we are now a mature democracy and a different Georgia from what we were even two years ago.

I'm not saying that we have reached the desired level of democracy. We need to still work very hard 24/7 to achieve our goals, but we are on the right trajectory. This is the most important thing – we know where we're going and we know what we want to achieve.

**Would you touch on some of the reforms Georgia has instituted over the past few years?**

Over the past two years, we have made some important changes to strengthen democratic institutions. We want to establish a real democracy and we're not just talking – we're proving it by taking action.

We changed the constitution to ensure proper checks and balances between the legislative and executive bodies. The President is no longer the chief executive and the parliament is now a true legislative body.

The court system is now absolutely independent from government interference. Democracy will not come if we don't establish a truly independent judiciary. We cannot attract investors if we don't have a truly independent court system.

We have enacted the Human Rights Action Plan and have also adopted a ground-breaking Anti-Discrimination Law. We also made police reforms, because the police force had been extremely politicized in previous years.

We've made great economic reforms to help small and medium-size enterprises. We're investing heavily in agriculture because it will be a key driving force for our economy.

One of our biggest achievements to date is the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union, which will provide many opportunities for the Georgian people.

**Are there strong opportunities available today for foreign investment and does the outside world understand what Georgia offers?**

Georgia has a unique strategic location and I want to restore the historical role that this corridor previously played. We're talking about developing the new Silk Road, a concept in which the Chinese President has openly expressed interest. Georgia can play an important role in connecting Europe and Asia. Georgia's role in facilitating trade between these regions is extremely important and will become even more so in the years to come.

As far as business opportunities, the agricultural sector is one of the fastest growing and most interesting sectors in Georgia due to our land's ample opportunities.

Hydropower is another area of opportunity. Georgia is using only 18 or 20 percent of its hydropower resources. As a nation, we have 26,000 rivers, so there is a huge opportunity to produce clean energy not only for our own consumption but also to export clean energy to Turkey over the high-voltage transmission lines we are currently building. This will enable us to export our electricity and clean energy to Turkey and, via Turkey, to Europe.

Tourism is also one of the fastest-growing sectors because Georgia offers a mountain-zone climate, as well as subtropical and continental areas. There are beautiful mountains, ski resorts which are growing fast, and a demand for three- to five-star hotels.

In terms of manufacturing and transport, we have expressed an interest in building a deep-sea port, which will enable us to receive large vessels. This is important in the restoration of Silk Road, because the Chinese routes will come through Georgia and will pass through this corridor. We need a deep sea port so these vessels can be loaded here and go on to Romania and Europe. This will only take 17 days, which makes it the quickest route between China and Europe.

We have just started working closely with the Chinese government on these matters, but this port will shorten routes, save money and time, and bring more energy and interest to the corridor.

I also want to mention the importance of peace and stability in our region. We completely changed our approach towards our neighbors, including Russia. We chose to adopt pragmatic, rational, and constructive policies towards them. We did this because we want to de-escalate the tension and to prevent another new conflict.

This is very important for attracting investors from other countries. We must persuade them that we are a reliable, predictable government with steady leaders who want peace and stability. In Georgia, if there is no peace, there won't be peace in the Caucasus region, which will create serious problems for the world.

Recently, I was in Azerbaijan to see the first segment of the Shah Deniz Phase 2 pipeline project. This is a \$45-billion project that will supply 16-billion cubic meters of gas to Europe and to Turkey. Georgia will also benefit from this project and is one of the most important countries involved with this project, which is an incentive to maintain a stable environment. Georgia remains a reliable transit capital. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline was our first project. This one is a bigger project involving other European countries, BP, and many other entities.

#### **Are you happy with U.S.-Georgia relations?**

The U.S. is Georgia's most important strategic partner, no matter which party is in power. We share a commitment to the common values of freedom and democracy. We're working closely with U.S. leaders in Congress and the Administration, who support Georgia moving closer to the European Union and the West.

I have developed great relationships with President Obama and Vice President Biden over the course of several meetings and conversations.

I see tremendous potential for future economic, political, and security collaboration between our two countries.

#### **Are you optimistic that we can address the global challenges stemming from your region of the world?**

It depends upon the leaders in the region. If we are all peace-lovers, and motivated to find a solution and reduce tensions, we will.

In this process, consolidated support and efforts are key. If there is no consolidated reaction, there will be no success, so that's very important.

But I'm optimistic and I know Georgia will play an important role in addressing global challenges.

#### **Is it important for you to build the awareness of the critical role Georgia can play?**



*H.E. and Mrs. Irakli Garibashvili with U.S. President and Mrs. Barak Obama*

Absolutely. I'm personally engaged in this effort, and I want to persuade all European leaders that Georgia is a unique place where there are a lot of opportunities.

I was recently in the UAE and we started to talk about our resources. Georgia's water resources are the second largest in the world per capita. Nobody knows what will happen in 10 years, except we do know that the oil reserves will get smaller in years to come. Therefore, we should find the same energy generation from hydroelectricity.

#### **How critical is Georgia's role in terms of mitigating climate change?**

The world doesn't pay enough attention to climate change but this is very important because it causes a lot of preventable disasters.

Georgia can be a part of the solution by producing clean power for itself and the region.

#### **You are one of the youngest democratic leaders today. Was the interest there early on?**

I've always been interested in politics and I always wanted to serve my country. I never imagined I could become Prime Minister, but I was privileged to have an interesting experience in the private sector where I worked with many talented people, including my predecessor.

I was privileged when I went into politics to serve as the Internal Affairs Minister.

I bring a unique perspective to this job. I know what the private sector needs from the government. I know the language of business and I also know what students and younger generations need. While I was studying at the Sorbonne, I worked as a waiter and dishwasher at a restaurant.

While running the country, it's crucial to be honest and absolutely dedicated to the job. You have to forget your own interests. You should remember one thing: You should serve your country as if you are serving your own family and treat your people with that same level of regard.

It's also important to be a good listener. I take advice from many people, including many international leaders.

I wouldn't be successful if I didn't have a good team. I work with the team to coordinate our efforts, to think about the future, and to solidify our vision of where we really want to take the country.

#### **Do you take time to appreciate what you have achieved to date or are you always looking to the future?**

I'm not the one who should appreciate these achievements; the Georgian people should appreciate these achievements because they belong to them. I know the final point that we need to reach and once we reach that point, I will allow myself to think about the past and appreciate what we've done. But right now, I don't have that comfort. I cannot afford to take that time as there is still too much work to be done.

We're still analyzing and thinking, and correcting how we're doing things. There have been some mistakes but we're moving forward. We don't stop. This is the nature of the development process.

We're in the tunnel now but we see the light. My dream is to make people see the light.

When you serve your country and your people, it gives you a different motivation and energy. ●