

THANK YOU for inviting me here. My special thanks to the Student Government Association for this chance to talk with you. I have great respect for the contributions of SAIS Bologna, going back to my time as Deputy Ambassador at the US Embassy in Rome. It is students like you who are going to lead the world through the challenges ahead, whether as politicians, academics, artists, lawyers – professionals of all sorts. I am grateful for your interest and commitment to building a better world.

Thank you as well for coming today to talk about two topics that are near and dear to my heart – Georgia and democracy. I am very interested in hearing your views and your questions. I have a few comments first but I want to leave plenty of time for Q&As.

It was a tremendous honor to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Georgia – a country that is small but mighty in its people’s struggle for freedom over 26 centuries of invasions and occupations, by everyone from the Romans and Persians, to the Mongols, Russians, and Bolsheviks.

Georgia is fascinating in its own right, but particularly so today because it is a good example of what we’re seeing in a number of other countries around the world. I’m going to focus on Georgia as a case study of broader trends by looking at Georgia at three different levels:

- Georgia as a sovereign nation, with its own history of survival in a difficult neighborhood;
- Georgia as an example of a former Soviet State in transition, following the collapse of the Soviet Union 30+ years ago; and
- Georgia as an example of a nascent democracy being driven toward authoritarianism.

We see this last case in a number of countries around the world, where liberal democratic processes and institutions are being used to undermine fragile democratic systems.

Let’s start by looking at the first case - Georgia as a small nation state. This is a country in a geo-strategic location that bridges Central Asia and Europe. It is a country that has always faced West, toward Europe, more than East, toward Asia – and it still does today.

It’s really a minor miracle that Georgia still exists largely intact – geographically and culturally. Georgia has survived as a sovereign nation, despite its size and internal fractures, by making strategic alliances that allowed it to preserve its unique language, religion, culture, and traditions over 26 centuries. This usually involved finding a “Protector” and hedging its bets, as King Irakli did in the late 1700’s when he was forced to make a deal with Russia to protect Georgia from the Persians – a deal Russia reneged on, leaving Georgia to be invaded and pillaged again.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia went through a chaotic period of lawlessness and upheaval that no Georgian wants to return to again. Eventually, Georgians made a clear choice to restore order through a democratic system, and to look to the West – the United States and Europe – to serve as its Protector, through membership in NATO and the EU. This is an ambition that is still underway, and one that is more complex and demanding than many Georgians expected. From my experience, most Georgians do not fully understand what NATO or EU membership requires or the responsibilities membership carries, which is partly why the public is frustrated that the process is taking so long.

This is not unique to Georgia – every aspirant country has chafed at the extensive democratic reforms required to become a member of the EU and NATO. This has been particularly difficult for former Soviet states, where not just a new liberal democratic system, but also a different mentality has to take hold. And we in NATO and the EU have to do a better job of explaining to Georgians how they will benefit from supporting these reforms, as well as their responsibilities as citizens if they choose to become part of the EU and NATO family of nations. From my experience at NATO, I can say that the strength of the Alliance is

based on the shared values and common interests of its members. In a consensus-based organization like NATO or the EU, it is essential that every country at the table share a commitment to freedom and democracy.

Georgia has made some impressive progress over the years in building its democratic institutions. But this is hard work, and those institutions are fragile. Many are under attack, as the current leadership tightens its grip on power and tries to reverse some of the reforms that would create a more level playing field for all.

The vast majority of Georgians – over 85% - want to live in a democratic country. They want EU and NATO membership. That is why it is vitally important Georgians do not lose hope in their NATO and EU aspirations. That goal is under attack from aggressive Russian disinformation that is designed to persuade Georgians not to bet on the West and to side instead with Russia, even though it occupies 20% of Georgia's territory. That is why it was so important the EU granted Georgia EU accession status last December even though the government had failed to fulfill many of the pre-requisites in good faith.

What is amazing and inspiring about Georgia is that, despite its history of occupation and fragmentation, Georgians have remained steadfast in their aspiration for freedom and democracy. This goes back to at least the 12th century, when Georgia had a successful female King, Tamar, and a form of Rule of Law we would recognize today. You can see it in the writings of many great Georgians, from Rustaveli, to Tsereteli, to Ilia Chavchavadze, who wrote of human rights and freedom of expression in the 19th century.

Georgians achieved their dream of independence in 1918, but only for three years. After the Russian empire fell, the Soviets fully recognized Georgia as a sovereign nation in 1918. Despite that, the Bolsheviks invaded in 1921 and crushed the short-lived Republic of Georgia. So Georgia is not new to the concept of democracy, but it has little *actual* experience living and governing as a democracy. Today's democracy started with the Rose revolution in 2003, to throw off the final vestiges of the Soviet legacy and rein in the crime, corruption, and chaos of the 1990's. Georgians have really only had two free and fair elections in the past 30 years – not enough to break free of big personality politics and the coercive practices that prevent truly free expressions of voters' political will.

Which leads to the second case, of Georgia as a good example of a former Soviet state in transition. It is an enormous undertaking to reshape a system from the top-down Soviet hierarchical structure, to a bottom-up, citizen-based liberal democracy. Like other former Soviet states, Georgia has its own oligarch, who is determined to maintain the status quo that works in his favor. It has endemic corruption, and fledgling democratic institutions that are struggling to function independently under intense pressure to coopt them by those holding power.

Georgia has had one party rule and big personality politics since independence – a legacy of the Soviet system. Fortunately, it also has a vibrant, active civil society, but that is now under attack – most lately by the ruling party's re-introduction of the "Foreign Agents" bill – a law soundly rejected by the people a year ago, when thousands of Georgians came out in the streets to say "NO" to a law designed to silence critics of the government, as it has in Russia. They are in the streets again this week, as the ruling party pushes this Russia-style bill through Parliament.

Georgia has a judiciary that is not independent or impartial regarding high-profile or high-profit cases. Without an impartial judiciary, it is impossible to have the rule of law that democracies are based on. There are many good professional judges who want to administer the law in accordance with the evidence presented, but they are not always allowed to act independently. Whether to hide corruption or hold on to power, an authoritarian state must control the judiciary.

In Georgia, where the ruling party controls the parliament, the judiciary, and the government, the President is the last remaining independent institution. We see the current President trying to rise above and act independently, whether lobbying for EU membership or on her Unity Initiative. Her recent pardon of a young protester who was sentenced to 10 years to send a message to young Georgians not to participate in protests, to stay home and not get involved, is the latest example of the President acting independently. Her acts of independence represent a threat to the ruling party's hold on power.

Which brings me to the third case – Georgia as an example of a nascent democracy being driven toward authoritarianism by those with an existential need to hold on to power. This concerns me the most because it reflects a global trend that threatens the way of life so many of us believe in, benefit from, and too often take for granted. We have seen this tactic around the world – in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas – of autocrats co-opting democratic processes -- like elections -- and democratic institutions -- like the Central Election Commission and judiciary – in some cases entrenching a particular group or family in power for decades. Allowing a fair election, where the ruling party might lose power, risks being thrown in jail by the new power, on real or trumped-up charges. This makes a peaceful transfer of power – another essential element of a liberal democracy – almost an act of courage in some countries, including Georgia.

Democracy dies step by step, not all at once, as Larry Diamond wrote. It is the degradation of pluralism, civil liberties, and Rule of Law that subvert the democratic process until you have a system where it is almost impossible to unseat the ruling party or individual through free and fair elections. There is no level playing field – for elections, for business, for justice. Institutions that are meant to constrain are neutered or taken over. Criticism of leaders becomes dangerous or futile, and people lower their heads from fear of the consequences of speaking out.

Or people leave. To me, it is telling that they are not fleeing to autocracies like Russia or China. Most are fleeing to liberal democracies in Europe and the U.S. As messy as democracy is, as inadequate in its protection of many, it is still the choice of the majority of people who have the freedom to choose where they want to live, work, and raise their families.

Georgians deeply love their country. And they deeply love freedom. Some Georgians are choosing to leave Georgia in search of greater freedom and opportunity. And many Georgians are choosing to stay and fight for the chance to live in a free, democratic Georgia.

Georgians have lived through this before. Their history is filled with events where freedom-loving Georgians finally said “Enough!” I don't know what the trigger will be this time – perhaps this “Foreign Agents” bill, or another rigged election this October, or something else entirely. But I am confident that spirit of independence and that attachment to freedom that has kept Georgia a proud, sovereign nation for 26 centuries will prevail once again.

Thank you. Didi madloba.