



Archil Sikharulidze, founder of the **SIKHA foundation**, participated in the Termez Dialogue on Connectivity between Central and South Asia, titled “Building a Common Space of Peace, Friendship, and Prosperity,” held on May 19–21 in Termez, Uzbekistan.

#### TRANSCRIPT OF THE SPEECH

### **Central Asia and Georgia in the New Geopolitical Reality**

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the invitation. My name is Archil Sikharulidze, I am from Tbilisi, Georgia. I am the founder of the research institute SIKHA Foundation, whose activities focus on the development of social and political sciences and the integration of advanced technologies into the country's higher education system.

Returning to the topic of our dialogue — regional cooperation and the development of self-governance free from external control by superpowers — I would like to note the following. I am confident that most of you know that over the past twenty years Georgia has been fully oriented toward the Western vector. The country saw its future exclusively in integration with NATO and the EU, practically ignoring the rest of the world as a possible alternative path of development and a contributor to the formation of a multipolar order. From the totalitarian ideology of communism, in which there was only one truth — the construction of socialism — Georgia transitioned to another form of ideological absolutism — the construction of a unipolar pro-Western world, in which Tbilisi was to integrate into the so-called "civilized world" by any possible means.

And in saying this, I am answering the first question of our conference: what was Georgia's problem? At least from my personal point of view. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia was searching for a grand purpose — its mission in the world. This purpose became the West. Georgia strove to escape as quickly as possible from the geopolitical reality of the Soviet space, which included not only Russia but also the South Caucasus, Central Asia, as well as China and India, which at the time were not perceived as significant actors in international relations. A persistent trend emerged of perceiving the rest of the world as secondary to the West. Unfortunately, this formula still holds today.

If we attempt to characterize Georgia's foreign policy in recent years, it could be said that it aimed to be an added value to Western efforts in building a pro-Western world. It was in this context that Tbilisi actively participated in so-called democratic peacekeeping missions, including operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Georgia ranked second after the United States in terms of military contingent size.

However, today Georgia is undergoing a fierce ideological struggle, prompted by a departure from radical pro-Western orientation. The model on which the country's foreign and domestic policies were built has begun to collapse under the pressure of harsh reality. Despite all efforts and sacrifices, Georgia has not become a member of NATO and has not made significant progress on the path of European integration. Promises of "light at the end of the tunnel" have not materialized.

The so-called strategic partnership with the United States should also be mentioned, which essentially amounted to political compliments without delivering real benefits: there were neither direct flights, nor free trade agreements, nor a visa-free regime. The Biden administration easily suspended the partnership, punishing Tbilisi for its political and geopolitical disobedience. As a result, the ruling party "Georgian Dream" was forced to seek alternative paths for development and cooperation.

This search resulted in frequent visits by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze to Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan. He has visited more post-Soviet countries in a short period than any other Georgian leader in the past twenty years. Just two years ago, a visit by a Georgian prime minister to Central Asia would have been nearly unimaginable.

Moreover, having not received real investments from the West, Georgia handed over the Anaklia deep-sea port megaproject to Chinese investors. This was less an ideological turn than a recognition that the West is no longer the only key player in global politics. Georgia needs partnerships with other countries as well. The hope that the West would cover all of Tbilisi's needs proved to be ideologically driven and, therefore, unrealistic.

At present, Georgia is experiencing a confrontation between two ideological platforms. On the one hand are the proponents of "radical Europeanness" — people convinced that Georgia has no alternative path other than going to Europe and determining its foreign policy only through it. On the other hand is the government, which, perhaps driven both by patriotic motives and a desire to retain power, has put forward the concept of "Georgianness" — the formula of "to Europe with dignity."

This approach has introduced new directions — China, India, Central Asia. The local elite has begun to abandon totalitarian pro-Western rhetoric, recognizing the country's sovereignty and its responsibility to its own population. My participation in today's dialogue also reflects the need to develop precisely this course. Georgia is looking toward Asia, and this is vitally necessary for a sustainable, pragmatic policy oriented toward well-being. The world beyond the West exists and is actively developing. This does not mean a rejection of Euro-Atlantic integration, but it requires a rethinking of strategy.

It is important to remember that Georgia's orientation toward the West was initially a reaction to a geopolitical vacuum and a conflict of interest with Moscow, not a religious dogma. Today, even the very fact of questioning Western hegemony causes discontent among part of the Western elite, who have long regarded Georgia as a zone of their own influence. The rise to power of Donald

Trump, an anti-establishment leader, destroyed the former “brotherhood” between Brussels and Washington, leaving the EU and Georgia alone. The new American administration, for which the South Caucasus is not a priority, is so far merely observing, analyzing the situation from the standpoint of its own interests. Therefore, Tbilisi now anxiously awaits: what course will Washington choose — will it make a deal with the current government or support the opposition?

How will the Georgian saga end? If Donald Trump gives Georgia the “green light” to deepen ties with Central and South Asia, the course of multivector and pragmatic policy will continue. But if Tbilisi is faced with a harsh ultimatum, especially in the context of engagement with China, the country will have to decide — whether or not to make sacrifices for the sake of the West. Relations with the EU are going through a phase of deepening “cold war.” For the first time in Georgia’s history of independence, European institutions are attempting to use sanctions as a tool of political pressure. So far, thanks to the resistance of countries like Hungary and Slovakia, pan-European sanctions have not been introduced, but a number of states have already imposed restrictions on representatives of the Georgian authorities, including prosecutors and judges.

The goal is to force the resignation of the government and transfer power to those political forces that are ready to follow Brussels’ geopolitical agenda: the strategic defeat of Moscow and Georgia’s involvement in a conflict with Russia, as Ukraine did. The government is being criticized under the banner of “defending democracy,” but it is naive to believe that true democracy ever existed in Georgia, or that the pro-Western opposition will build a state in which alternative worldviews are permitted. This is confirmed by numerous decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, which mention opposition representatives responsible for massive human rights violations but who are still supported by the West.

In conclusion. The Georgian Dream government is not the most democratic and free force; it is also prone to corruption and mistakes, to the desire to preserve and increase power. However, it is the most adequate and realistic at the moment, since it was forced to recognize and voice the opinion that Georgia must free itself not only from the Soviet past but also from any form of ideological totalitarianism. As the political elite in power, it is attempting to realize and communicate that the main interests of society are not ideological myths, but the necessity of conducting a pragmatic, balanced policy. Such a policy requires active cooperation with Central Asia. The Termez Dialogue is a platform on which Tbilisi can present itself not as part of the Western world, but as a sovereign player on the international stage.



*S. Imiyev*