Archil Sikharulidze, founder of the SIKHA foundation, participated in the “Armenia–Georgia Strategic Partnership: Towards New Horizons of Cooperation” forum, organized by the ORBELI Center held on June 18–20 in Dilijan, Armenia.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE SPEECH

Political Science and the Higher Education System of Georgia: Ontology, Epistemology, and Reasoning

Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to speak at this forum. I was asked whether I could present something about academia, something scientific, and do so in a way that connects it to both politics and Armenia.

I recalled that in 2024, at the request of our Russian colleagues, my co-author Nina Skvortsova and I wrote an academic article titled "Political Science in Georgia: Epistemology and Determinants." I will now briefly explain what this article was about and how it relates to politics—and to Armenia.

Many of us are somewhat tired of the standard analyses of political processes, and so, when our Russian colleagues approached us with the idea of exploring something innovative, I suggested looking at pressing political issues from a different perspective. In particular, I proposed asking: what do we know about politics? And how do we know it? Most importantly, why do we know what we know?

These questions were particularly relevant to me, as I had been teaching at Tbilisi State University for about ten years and was well aware of the difficult, to put it mildly, state of Armenian studies in Georgia, for example. Just a few minutes ago, my colleague Giorgi Udzilauri mentioned that it has been 35 years, and we are still seeking opportunities for cooperation between Georgian and Armenian universities.

Returning to the study itself, we asked: what do Georgian political science scholars know? What topics do we study? A second question followed: how do we study them? That is, how do we

approach issues like security or democracy? And most importantly, how did we arrive at these approaches? Answering these questions may led us to a deeper, more complex challenge—Georgian-Armenian relations show no real progress. there are no textbooks on the subject, and no genuine "brotherly" or close ties between the two states.

With your permission, I will briefly outline the methodology—after all, I am a scholar. I realize this is not an academic conference, but I feel obliged to do so. **What did we do?** Given the limited scope of the study, we focused on Georgia's leading universities that have actual political science departments—not nominal ones, but those employing scholars who actively work in the discipline.

We identified the academic staff, as they formally represent the academic landscape of political science in Georgia. Then, we reviewed the scholarly—and quasi-scholarly—works they had published over the previous five years: what topics they addressed and how they were analyzed. In particular, we looked for whether theory was used or in what analytical direction the works were headed. It must be said that not all members of Georgia's academic sphere engage in strictly academic work.

From the primary themes addressed by Georgian political science scholars, we answered the question: **"what?"** By understanding the direction or the theoretical framework used, we approached the question: **"how?"** Finally, we conducted a qualitative analysis to answer the question: **"why?"**

So, what did we find? Let's begin with the "what?"

Based on the works we analyzed, there was a clear dominance of one theme—democratization. Democracy and related topics were the most researched by Georgian scholars. The second most common topic was European integration. The third was national security and threats. Next came civic integration, modernization, and so on.

Thus, the top three themes were democratization and values, European integration, and national security threats. In sum, the vast majority of Georgian scholars primarily study democracy-related issues.

Democracy and values are automatically linked to European integration, to Europe more broadly, and to national security. These topics are also connected to Georgia's aspirations for NATO integration. We can observe that all of this is tightly intertwined with the West. Armenia and the South Caucasus, meanwhile, occupy secondary positions in this thematic landscape—or are entirely absent.

That answers the question of "what?". But what about "how?"

Nearly 79% of all theories or general analytical frameworks used in the reviewed works fell within the category of so-called liberal theories—for example, classical liberal theory, institutional liberalism, and neoliberalism. These are theories popular in the West—or at least

were popular 10 to 15 years ago, when I myself was a university student.

Coming in a distant second was classical realism, which in Georgia is considered marginal. In fact, Georgian academic discourse often regards realism as outdated and irrelevant for understanding contemporary political processes. Further down the list, with only minimal representation, were neoclassical realism, war theory, constructivism, and so forth. Here we see a clear trend toward mainstream ideas favored by a broader circle of Western scholars and analysts.

In other words, to answer the question **"what?"** — Europe, democracy, values, standards; and somewhat paradoxically, the same topics is being studied by Georgian civil society.

To answer the question **"how?"** — standard liberal theories.

Now, to the most important question for Georgian-Armenian relations: "why?"

We identified three factors. The first and most important lies in the reform of Georgia's higher education system under Mikheil Saakashvili. The goal was to align Georgia with the West — to put the country on a Western track. As a result, all existing ties were severed, and attention was fully redirected toward a bright Western future—toward NATO and the EU. We discarded all books, all research, all scholars who did not align with this mission; we shut down institutions — creating a rupture between Georgia and its past, as well as between Georgia and countries that were not part of this Western integration framework. There was a single idea, a single logic, a single vision.

As part of this grand mission, the country did not adopt a classical academic approach but instead implemented so-called **civic education based on values**. Georgia skipped over the important phase of developing a classical education system, where science is apolitical and scholars are observers, not participants in political and social processes. Science itself came under strong influence from politics, ideology, and values. Our universities began training not scholars, but civic activists ready to defend Western values. Civic activism and the performative expression of civic positions essentially replaced science, scientific method, and methodology. Science should study — not propagate. But given the very nature of Georgia's higher education system, this is unlikely. And so, we now have Georgian scholars engaged not in science, but in civic activism among students and within universities. I must say — science and civic activism are two different things.

The third reason for the **"why?"** is funding. And funding is either predominantly Western — or non-existent. If you accept Western support, it often implies support for civic education, as mentioned earlier. Incidentally, the research I am discussing today was conducted out of scholarly enthusiasm, since it is virtually impossible to secure funding in Georgia for apolitical research topics. Moreover, you will not find financial support for a rigorous academic study of Armenian-Georgian relations — neither in Yerevan nor in Tbilisi. To summarize, funding for research projects in Georgia that are not oriented toward civic activism, advocacy, or analysis of

policy documents for activist purposes or Western values — is minimal. Science has become a matter of often-punishable personal initiative. To put it plainly, if you want to engage in science, you must do it in your spare time — even if you are officially part of university academic staff.

And how does all this relate to Armenia?

The answer is quite straightforward. When Georgia reformed its higher education system and severed ties with its past, Armenia remained on the other side — on the side of the so-called "uncivilized world," viewed as part of Russia's, rather than the U.S. and Europe's, sphere of influence. Consequently, most ties with Armenian universities, research centers, and scholars were either completely severed or radically reassessed. Armenia — lacking a pro-Western democratic framework, not building civic activism in the Western style, and not receiving substantial funding from Western institutions — became irrelevant and unnecessary.

It is only now, after the so-called Velvet Revolution of 2018 and the rise to power of Nikol Pashinyan, that some Western actors, including Georgian elites, have begun to see in Yerevan a potential partner for European integration. Until then, Georgia saw itself as a frontier between the pro-Western "civilized" world and the sphere of influence of anti-democratic forces — the "jungle," to use the words of Josep Borrell.

And so, Georgia has grown distant from Armenia to such an extent that today we are forced to look for paths to cooperation, despite a shared and intertwined history that spans at least two millennia.

Thank you for your attention!

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