
Georgian leader hails regional cooperation in oil pipeline inauguration speech.

Channel 1, Tbilisi 13/7/2006

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has said that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline is opening new prospects for regional cooperation. He was speaking at the pipeline inauguration ceremony in the Turkish port of Ceyhan on 13 July. Saakashvili said that the pipeline project had led to "a completely new political situation" in the region in which there was no longer any place for "a policy of diktat". He also said that regional economic projects were transforming their participants into "some of the most dynamically developing countries in the whole world". The following is an excerpt from Saakashvili's speech, which was broadcast live by Georgian Public Television Channel 1:

[Saakashvili] Your excellencies, esteemed President Sezer, President Aliyev and Prime Minister Erdogan, ladies and gentlemen.

For us, today's ceremony and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline mean far more than an economic, political or energy project. This is a historic prerequisite for our countries' freedom and independence and a solid foundation for our future success. This project is very important because - together with the [Sah Daniz] gas pipeline project which is also very important for Georgia - it marks the end of an era of one type of relations and the beginning of a completely new era in relations and a completely new political situation in our region. From now on, the possibility of confrontational methods and a policy of diktat being used is ending and a completely new era is starting in the Caucasus and the wider region which includes Central Asia, post-Soviet space and Turkey. A new political reality is emerging, which is based on cooperation and respect for mutual interests.

During the discussion of this project, my country Georgia has often been referred to as a corridor. [Smiles] I would like to state categorically that Georgia is not a corridor. Generally, I do not accept the concept of a corridor. A corridor is surrounded by walls and is an enclosed space, no matter how big the building is. In reality, what is happening today means that we have created one large space rather than corridors and terminals. This is a space for cooperation, mutual understanding and friendship between our countries.

A completely new reality has formed within Georgia as well. We have been cooperating very well with BP and other companies working here.

A completely new economic reality is emerging. I can tell you frankly that for several years, before the Rose Revolution in 2003, the oil pipeline project was the only source of Georgia's economic growth.

The project has effectively been completed, yet this year the Georgian economy will grow much faster thanks to other local economic factors.

A synergy has emerged. We have managed to create a completely new reality. Not only have we changed our strategic energy [supply] lines, but we have also completely changed the domestic energy distribution system in Georgia and created a new investment climate.

The fact that there is no longer corruption in Georgia - I declare this with a full sense of responsibility - has allowed us to achieve this: whereas a year ago we were unsuccessfully pleading with several large foreign companies to buy our power grid for one dollar and operate it, several weeks ago, that is a year later, we sold just a part of the same grid for several hundred million dollars. That is the result of more effective administration and a more transparent environment free of corruption.

We are moving into a new era. In the Soviet period we were told who we were supposed to like and who we were not supposed to. Not only were we forbidden to have warm relations with Turkey, but the Soviet regime's ideology was that Turkey was the Georgians' enemy. Today and yesterday I have been telling our Turkish brothers that in the space of just a few years Turkey's consistent, generous, friendly and fraternal attitude has completely negated many decades of work by Soviet ideologists.

For Georgia today, Turkey is a most important partner and a great friend. We have entered a phase of great cooperation with Turkey.

Turkey is fast becoming Georgia's leading trading partner. Turkey is fast becoming, and will probably become, the leading investor in Georgia.

I remember well that when two years ago Prime Minister Erdogan arrived for the first time in a destroyed and devastated Batumi, we together went to the border crossing where there were long queues of suffering citizens who needed to get Turkish or Georgian visas. We promised each other that there would be no visas needed for travel between Georgia and Turkey.

Now Georgia and Turkey have one of the most transparent and free borders. This used to be a border between NATO and the Soviet bloc, a border with the largest number of restrictions and bans, but now it is one of the most transparent, easily negotiable and friendly borders in the region between two fraternal states. That is the result of a decision by politicians who care about their people.

The prime minister and I also decided that Batumi airport would be in joint use. This decision was taken, and Batumi airport will open in November, as will a new Tbilisi airport terminal, which is being built by Turkish companies. It means that Batumi and Tbilisi - especially Batumi from November, which is a new development - will be linked to the whole world via Istanbul with daily services or perhaps several services a day.

I talked earlier about our experience with Turkish business and the arrival of many business people in Georgia. Many construction companies have arrived. In these companies, side by side with Turkish engineers, Georgian specialists are working and learning to use modern working methods. This happened during the oil pipeline project and is happening now in the wider construction industry. [Passage omitted: more on Turkish business involvement in Georgia]

That is real cooperation, a real synergy. We no longer have corruption, we have reduced taxes, and we have opened borders. The governments have done everything possible to facilitate access to markets. For the first time, under a low taxation regime, 1m bottles of Georgian wine will enter Turkey this year. That will be the first time in history. Georgian agricultural produce is also entering Turkey at a time when it faces certain problems on other markets.

I think that this kind of cooperation as well as the development we are witnessing in Azerbaijan - [changes tack] We are very pleased about that because, again, no other state is closer to us. Such development and mutual assistance will allow us to create completely new prospects for our people.

We have arrived here after going through a very difficult period. We were in a very difficult situation. But the situation is changing radically. We are happy about it, our people are happy about it, although there may also be forces that do not particularly like that.

Likewise, the Kars-Akhalkalaki railway project we are currently working on is a new transport link. The Kars-Akhalkalaki railway means the creation of hundreds or thousands of jobs in the Javakheti region of Georgia [area in southern Georgia populated mainly by ethnic Armenians], a completely new transport infrastructure, and a new strategic significance for the region.

The oil and gas pipelines, new airports, new railways - it was hard to imagine all that not so long ago. Not so long ago our countries were described as weak, flawed and unstable countries whose prospects were poor. Now these are some of the most dynamically developing countries in the whole world, which have become examples of development, consolidation and vision of the future for many other nations and countries.

[Passage omitted: switches to English and the broadcast continues with a Georgian translation superimposed; Saakashvili thanks BP for its courage and long-term vision, welcomes the creation of alternative energy routes, looks forward to new projects]
