A Conversation from the Front Lines with Commander of the Georgian Legion Mamuka Mamulashvili

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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- Mamuka Mamulashvili, Georgian Legion Commander

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://youtu.be/jQoUbU2ccKE

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Luke Coffey:

Thank you for joining us today with this very important discussion with the commander of the Georgian Legion, Mamuka Mamulashvili. Commander Mamulashvili has been commanding the Georgian Legion since 2014 in Ukraine, he has a fascinating background and fascinating set of life experiences since a very young age, fighting the Russians and defending freedom in his homeland of Georgia, but also in Ukraine as well. Commander Mamulashvili joins us today from the front lines of Ukraine. As you can see, it looks very cold there and we're honored that he has taken the time from his very busy schedule to meet with us today. So thank you gmadlobt Commander Mamulashvili, thank you for joining us.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Thank you for having me here, Luke. I'm always very happy to see you, so I hope we'll have a good conversation today.

Luke Coffey:

Absolutely. I'm sure we will. So for our viewers watching who may not know very much about the Georgian Legion, can you just tell us in general terms about the Georgian Legion, what you are doing and how it started?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Okay. Let's say, first of all, what is currently a shape of a Georgian Legion? Georgian Legion today is the largest foreign information within the Ukrainian army. We are the contractors, officially contractors of Ukrainian military intelligence, a part of military intelligence. So Georgian Legion has more than 1300 soldiers. Georgian Legion was created by me in 2014, especially to help Ukrainians, to defend Ukrainian freedom and sovereignty and support Ukrainian army. We started training Ukrainian army, several Georgian ex-militaries from Georgia. We are training Ukrainian brigades, military brigades, militia battalions and civilians and different kind of stuff that needed to be prepared for war against Russia actually, because Russia has already launched a hybrid war against Ukraine and it was very familiar for Georgians. So that's why we came to support Ukraine. And we're currently here for nine years. And today Georgian Legion is doing only special operations against Russian occupational forces. And the recent operation was done two days ago. There is already a footage, a video of our recent operation, about 10 Russian special forces intelligence soldiers were destroyed.

Luke Coffey:

That's always good news to hear. Many of our viewers will be very happy to hear that as well here in the United States. Can you tell us a bit about your personal background, your personal experiences, and about your family? I mean, I know you have a very distinguished family, both in military service and politics. So can you tell us about your childhood and growing up and what convinced you, what led you to where you are today?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Half of the family was military, unfortunately my father died, general of Georgian army, and I was 14 when I first experienced Russian aggression. I was together with my father in my
father's brigade as a soldier. And many Georgian young people have experienced this and had to go to war very early at the age 15, 14. So I was not the only kid fighting for Georgian sovereignty by that time, there were a lot of young men fighting for Georgia. Unfortunately, we had to experience after the collapse of former Soviet Union, and Georgia was the first country who experienced Russian aggression. So I was at the frontline for a year with my father, we fought together. At the end of the conflict in Abkhazia region in Georgia, we go to captivity together with my father and I have been in Russian captivity for three months. So all this actually gave me a reason why I had to dedicate my life fighting terrorists, fighting terrorist state. And I did so for last 30 years. I'm fighting against Russia, I'm fighting against Russian terrorists and we're succeeding doing that.

Luke Coffey:

So this first war against Russia in Abkhazia, this was in the 1990s, correct?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Yep. It was 1992, the beginning of the year when actually invaded the territory of Georgia. Georgia had not strong army.

Luke Coffey:

And I do recall that there's video footage correct? Of you as a prisoner of war with your father.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Yes. It was taken by Russian media that were propagandizing that Georgia has no soldiers and they're using children to fight. So there is a documentary about it and footage of 90s where me and my father are in a captivity and Russian media is talking to us. So yes, it exists.

Luke Coffey:

And I also saw, I remember you posted a picture on Twitter of you and your father serving together again, but this time he was in the Georgian Legion fighting in Ukraine. Can you tell us about that?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

My father was one of the ideologists of Georgian Legion. He was the one who told me that I have to go and help Ukrainians. He was at the front lines when he was 72. He was fighting against Russia for three years. He got diabetic in Ukraine and unfortunately he died recently in Georgia. So all my family is fighting Russian aggression for ages. All my family was killed by Russian army in 1921 during annexation by Russia of Georgia. So it's a family tradition. My sister is in a political party fighting against Russian occupation also in Georgia, and she's the member of Georgian Parliament. So it's family tradition. And not only our family is doing that, a lot of Georgian families unfortunately had the same problems and all of them understand that we have to unite to fight terrorist state.

Luke Coffey:
Absolutely. And the Georgian people, not only the Georgian people, but the Ukrainian people, but also Americans, people in Europe, we’re very lucky to have a family like yours that is willing to do so much for freedom and liberty and sovereignty. It’s such an interesting story. I want to jump forward now to 2014. So you had already spent time fighting the Russians as a teenager, I believed you were involved in some way with the Chechen conflicts.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Yes.

Luke Coffey:

Helping Chechens fighting against the Russian state. And then in 2014 we saw what happened with the Maidainau, Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea. And then you arrived to Ukraine. Can you tell us about when you arrived? What was the situation like on the ground?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Generally this war for Georgians, it's a one cycle of war that started in Georgia and it is a continuing war in Ukraine. That's how we accept this war. Actually, when I arrived to Ukraine, Ukraine had only volunteer movement. They have not had an army. So what we started doing, it was training Ukrainians, giving and sharing our experience and getting to the front lines and fighting too. So we were combining, doing both things together, and we were training them right on the front line because guys were totally unexperienced and they were facing terrorist state that we have already faced. And it was very important for us to share whatever we know about them. So after a couple of years, Ukrainian parliament has accepted the law about integrating foreigners into the Ukrainian army. And we were the first foreigners as a unit to become a part of the Ukrainian army. So after 2016, we were already a part of the armed forces of Ukraine.

Luke Coffey:

And can you tell us about those first few hours, the first few days of Russia's invasion, of Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine in February of this year? I know that you were always prepared, always ready for this moment, but did you expect the invasion to happen when it did? Or did you think Putin was bluffing? What was it like in the first few hours when the invasion happened?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

We were ready to meet Russian forces, Georgian Legion. We were ready to meet them even three months prior to the full scale war started. So we also launched a training program for civilians, especially for this cause because we knew that Russia is going to start a full scale war. So we prepared more than 4,000 civilians and about 7,000 militaries before 24th of February. So for us, it was clear that Russia is going to start the war. We were the first to meet Russian forces in Hostomel Airport. And the only surprising thing for us was that I never expected to see Russian fighting helicopters so close to capital of Ukraine. So we just drove 30 minutes from here and there it was, we met Russian helicopters already bombing are of Hostomel, that's where was our first fight actually against Russians.

Luke Coffey:
And for the viewers who aren't familiar with the geography, Hostomel Airport is just outside Kyiv and the Russians launched a air assault. Mamuka, how many helicopters would you estimate the Russians sent?

**Mamuka Mamulashvili:**

We counted 31 helicopter, but totally as I got the information after that there were 33 helicopters bombing us.

**Luke Coffey:**

And we now know that the Russian defeat at Mamuka in the early days of the war was probably the decisive battle that saved the capital, that saved Kyiv. And I think it'll also be the decisive battle that will eventually doom Russia to see Russia's defeat inside Ukraine. Can you tell us some of the specifics about the battle, the role that Georgian Legion played? Was it at first trying to get people mobilized to go to the airport? Was that difficult? Was there a lot of information? Or were you operating with just limited knowledge?

**Mamuka Mamulashvili:**

Actually even by that time we were not properly equipped for this such kind of operation, unfortunately. But we accepted the challenge actually, and we did maximum that day to stop Russian paratroopers spreading in Hostomel area. So it was quite difficult because we ran out of ammunition and it was quite a heavy day because we saw how Russian helicopters were bombing, targeting the civilian blocks. So actually whatever they needed it was to spread a panic among population. And there were a lot of civilians already killed by helicopters in Hostomel area. So it was quite heavy to see what they were doing and for what they were coming to Ukraine. For Georgians, it was not surprised. And unfortunately civilian population was shocked by that. We have seen many civilians that never expected to happen it near Kyiv.

**Luke Coffey:**

Yeah, it was shocking to see some of the video footage on television or social media. Yeah, I was recently in Kyiv and I visited Hostomel and Bucha and these areas and it's still shocking today to see the devastation that the Russian forces left behind. During the battle of Hostomel and during the early days of the war, the Georgian Legion wasn't as big as it is now. You mentioned that it's about 1300 soldiers. I imagine after the fighting really started, after Russia's invasion, you received many volunteers from around the world. I know that most of your fighters are from Georgia, but can you tell us a little bit about some of the other countries where you have volunteers? And can you tell us about this time when you had these people wanting to join? You probably had too many people or people with the wrong experiences that wanted to join. How did you handle that as the commander?

**Mamuka Mamulashvili:**

It was quite difficult recruitment process during all those eight, nine years because there was a huge flow of volunteers coming and we had to sort them out, understand why they're coming, what they're fighting for, what's their ideology. We never accepted in Georgian Legion, Nazis or any radical views, so we had to sort them out and we accepted only combat experienced soldiers. So from all over the world. And today those guys are sharing experience of their
armies between each other. That's what makes Georgian Legion really special in comparison to many different units. So the combination of different countries, there are representatives of more than 33 countries today in a Georgian Legion like Americans, Brits, Japanese or there are the many different nationalities who are today a part of Georgian Legion. So it was quite difficult to handle the recruitment process. I had to go accept new soldiers coming to Georgian Legion and it was very heavy process to do when it's a war in a country,

Luke Coffey:

Of course, very challenging, especially when it's likely Russia would try to take advantage and maybe infiltrate or try to get a Russian sympathizer inside the unit. What can you tell us today about the area of operations for the Georgian Legion? Of course we don't need the details for operational security reasons, but generally speaking, what is the Georgian Legion doing today? You mentioned that you just completed a significant operation. Can you give us some more details on what that operation was and how it was conducted?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Okay. Georgian Legion is mainly doing reconnaissance. Georgian Legion is doing assaults on high ranking officers of Russian Army, command centers, special technique that is placed nearby the front lines. So Georgian Legion is doing special operations now, Georgian Legion is doing ambushes against Russian reconnaissance groups and the footage of the video is already on social media. You can take it and see the latest operation. So all those nine years gave us a huge experience fighting terrorists. So till today, Georgian Legion has evolved and became one of the best military formations that is fighting to save lives, first of all.

Luke Coffey:

And what is the situation like on the front lines in terms of morale, equipment, winter weather gear and winter cold weather equipment? The weapons that you have? Not necessarily just the Georgian Legion, but just generally across the board for the Ukrainian armed forces.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Generally it's very important for Ukraine to receive air defense systems. Even today in Kyiv there was an air attack by Iranian drones, and as far as I know, several civilians were killed. Unfortunately, we are experiencing it every day and we hope on Western support and we hope that Ukraine will at last receive patriot systems that will save 100s and 100,000s of Ukrainian lives because each minute of hesitation kills Ukraine and each politician has to remember it. And we need a lot of artillery systems, artillery shells, Highmark systems that are very usable on the front lines and it help Ukrainians to de-occupy territories on the east and south of Ukraine. And Ukraine needs more support now. It has not finished yet.

Luke Coffey:

And specifically for the Georgian Legion, it's likely there'll be a number of policy makers and decision makers watching this video. What is your message to them here in Washington on what the Georgian Legion needs?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:
I would say that Georgian Legion also needs military specific and unfortunately, I just don't want to specify openly. Georgian Legion needs the most, more Ukrainian lives to be saved. So I would address this small speech to actually politicians from United States and I would say that we rely on you and United States has always been an example for us, example of democracy and freedom. And we want to know that you are covering our back guys. Each minute of hesitation giving Ukraine military aid and support kills 100s and 1000s of Ukrainians. So before making a decision, any decision about Ukraine, please think that each minute you are thinking, Ukrainian life is taken, it might be a kid or a woman.

**Luke Coffey:**

So we need decisiveness from the US government on the issue of supporting Ukraine?

**Mamuka Mamulashvili:**

Of course, it's very important. Our medics are not working now with our military. They're working with civilians who are getting shelled 24 hours and we are trying to save lives on the front line, lives of civilians. Georgian Legion was made to save lives and I would like to ask you to help us do that.

**Luke Coffey:**

Absolutely. And moving away from Ukraine now and going to your homeland of Georgia, Russia occupies about 20% of Georgia's internationally recognized territory. Some of the Russian soldiers that were part of the occupation force have been sent to Ukraine. And you're fighting them in Ukraine. And I know you once said that the more of them that you kill in Ukraine, the less you're going to have to deal with someday in Georgia.

**Mamuka Mamulashvili:**

Of course.

**Luke Coffey:**

And do you think that in your lifetime, all of Georgia's territory will be liberated and under the control of the government?

**Mamuka Mamulashvili:**

I'm sure that Georgia and occupied territories by Russia will be free very soon and we'll de-occupy them as soon as possible. But it should the decision should be the decision of Georgian society to do it military way or a political way. So whatever Georgian society decides, we are the soldiers of our country, we'll be ready to obey and to do so.

**Luke Coffey:**

And you once tweeted, and I'm going to quote this tweet, "The fight for Ukraine will end on the territory of Russia." That's quite the message. What do you mean by this? That the fight for Ukraine will end on the territory of Russia.
Mamuka Mamulashvili:

The war in Ukraine has launched a process inside Russia, that will break Russia into pieces. And Russia has no right to exist in such a shape as it is now. It is a country of terrorists, it is a country of aggressors. And it has hostages of several countries that are now the part of the federation that don't want to live with Russia, that have nothing in common with Russia. And their views are practically contra-Russia views and they're forced to live with Russia. So in my opinion, Russia has started this co-ops process themselves, starting war in Ukraine. So the process has already started and I think it'll break down Russia into small pieces and we'll get rid of terrorist state at last.

Luke Coffey:

And it's important that the United States and our partners in Europe are prepared for this. I don't think many people, many policymakers are thinking about this scenario. And I agree with you. I think it's very likely that the map of the Russian Federation that we see today, I think it's very likely it'll look different in 10 years, 15 years, maybe even sooner.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

I think a lot sooner. And we'll see all those changes next two years maximum because Russia has committed suicide starting war in Ukraine and it'll break Russia into federations that has never been a part of Russia, a part of Russian mentality.

Luke Coffey:

And you mentioned you've been fighting against Russians since you were a teenager, I think since age 14. So you've had a lifetime of experience dealing with this. You must be one of the most experienced battlefield commanders when it comes to fighting Russia anywhere in the world. So with all of this experience, what have you learned over the years? What are the messages, what are the lessons that you can share with us, with the viewers on what we need to be doing to stop Russian aggression?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

No, actually I experienced all this when I was just 14. And only decision it made me make was to fight against it because it is the biggest evil that has ever existed on the Earth, I mean Russia and Russian citizens. During all those years, I learned to be cold minded. It's not emotions that are moving us, it's a job that has to be done against evil and somebody has to do it. So I would tell everybody that, don't trust Russia. Russia never keeps promises. Russia is a liar. Russia is a terrorist. Russia is planning terrorist acts all around the world. Russia is more dangerous than Taliban. Russia is more dangerous than Al-Qaeda and any terrorist organizations that still exist, were created by Russia. And politicians must at last understand that they cannot talk to Russia the same language they're talking to civilized countries.

Luke Coffey:

Well, hopefully we learned the lessons of the 1990s when we had this hope, this desire that Russia could become a democratic country, part of the family of nations. I think this is also very naive. I don't think it'll ever happen and I think we have to be prepared for the foreseeable
future. We have to assume that forever, Russia will pose a threat to its neighbors. I absolutely agree with that. Now in the United States, there's strong support for Ukraine, there's strong support for Georgia. When I go to places around the country in the middle of nowhere, I'll see Ukrainian flags flying, for example. In Congress there's support for Ukraine, support for Georgia. And I know that there's some interests in the work of the Georgian Legion because people are fascinated by this idea that these Georgians who have suffered Russian aggression are so committed to freedom and democracy, that they would go to Ukraine and help the Ukrainians defend their homeland. What sort of engagement have you had with US Congress, or what sort of reception? Have you met with any congressmen? Have you discussed any of these issues with Capitol Hill?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

I have very close, friendly, let's say meetings I have had with several congressmen, senators and different politicians from United States. And for me it's an honor to be accepted and to have a chance to speak to them and share my opinion. I would say that Georgia is 12 times smaller than Ukraine. And Georgia stood against Russian aggression in 90s when it had no military potential, no trained soldiers, and the army was totally collapsed. Georgia has turned against Russian aggression and still stands. And we are the example that Georgia is not broken. Even being 10 and 100 times smaller than Russia, Georgians will never give up fighting for freedom. And we are a clear example. Georgian Legion is the biggest formation after Ukrainians, standing against Russian aggression today in Ukraine. And I want to tell all politicians, Western politicians that even if Georgian government is for Russian today, you have to support Georgia. You have to support Georgian society and Ukrainian and Ukraine and never give it up because we are keeping the principles of democracy in our hearts and we are giving our lives for that.

Luke Coffey:

And I know you're very busy with operations in Ukraine, but do you have any plans to visit Washington?

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Yes, I had plans to visit Washington recently, but I had a visa issue and unfortunately representations of consolation of United States in Poland where I was last time, is quite bureaucratic. And it was very difficult to redo my United States visa to my passport. I was waiting for one month and I could not make it done. So unfortunately I had to get back because there is a war in Ukraine and I'm the one who participates in this war.

Luke Coffey:

It's shocking to hear, Americans need to hear your message. We would benefit from hearing your message and having you hear in Washington and maybe in other places around America so they can learn about the sacrifices made, about your desire to fight for freedom. I think this would really help inform the American public. And I have to say, I find it extraordinary that we allow millions of people to sneak through our southern border, but then we have this freedom fighter trying to get a visa to come here to meet with policymakers and you face all this bureaucracy. So as an American, I apologize for that. I'm not responsible for it, but I do apologize for it.
Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Look, it's not a problem. We can do it online, share this experience, but it would be good to come to speak to politicians, to different organizations about the situation in Ukraine. And it would be a big honor for me. So it would be very helpful if you could help with that too. It's quite difficult to face the bureaucracy because we've been facing bureaucracy since I was born in former Soviet Union, and I hope I'll not face it anymore.

Luke Coffey:

Yeah. Oh gosh. Yeah. I completely understand your frustration. Well, Mamuka, like I said, I know you're busy, you're calling in from, I think you're using a starlink connection from the frontline of the war in Ukraine against Russian aggression. So I don't want to keep you any longer, but I do want to sincerely thank you for taking the time to talk with us today.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Thank you. It's its honor for me to talk to you and to see you again. So I'm in touch. And if there are any additional questions, I'm ready to answer

Luke Coffey:

Great. And again, stay safe, stay warm. God bless you and your soldiers and the people of Ukraine and Georgia.

Mamuka Mamulashvili:

Glory to Ukraine and glory to United States that are supporting us and we feel it. Thank you guys.

Luke Coffey:

Thank you so much for joining us.