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THOMAS DE WAAL: NATO MEMBERSHIP IS NOT NECESSARILY ESSENTIAL FOR GEORGIA

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First part of an exclusive interview of "Caucasus Watch" with Thomas de Waal, a senior fellow with Carnegie Europe, specializing in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region. In this part of the interview, the expert comments on the current developments around Georgia.

- You say that Georgia is the success story of the Caucasus and the most European of the three countries. Last year, Georgia gained access to the Schengen-Zone. Can Georgia progress along this path and increasingly integrate with the EU, without the military protection of NATO?

- My answer to that would basically be yes. NATO membership is not necessarily essential for Georgia to develop in the world. The close relationship with the EU and the economic aspect seem to me more important. I do not see Russia as a major threat to Georgia since 2008 and I believe Moscow currently has no aggressive designs on Georgia. Obviously, Russia does not want Georgia to join NATO and wants to have a generally friendly regime in Tbilisi. Nevertheless, I think the days when we were talking about a Russian military threat to Georgia are over and Georgia has found an answer to that question without NATO, which is a strong bilateral relationship with the US. The Pentagon has professionalized Georgias army by providing training and so on. So Georgia will probably be able to make progress on the most important issues, which are the government, the economy and trade without worrying too much about NATO.

- You described the problem of informal power in Georgia with Ivanishvili reviving the opposition, just to become what appears to be the next strongman. Can Georgia overcome these obstacles of informal power? The narrative in the book is about a conflict between an open Georgia vs. a closed Georgia?

- There is a big struggle going on in Georgia and we do not know the answer. Certainly, Georgian institutions are stronger than they were, but we have seen two individuals in the last 15 years having enormous personal influence, first Saakashvili, than Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili, as we have seen, is still a kind of informal king of Georgia. Still, it is interesting to note that the recent presidential election, of which the first round just happened, was a big setback for Ivanishvili. He personally chose the candidate Zurabishvili, who was obviously not a good choice. Experts thought she would win the first round, but she did not. This was a big setback for him and the opposition candidate Vashadze is now the favorite to win in the 2nd round. That shows that Georgian politics is still alive and well and that society is still quite active. Georgians are still able to mobilize against what they see as a monopoly or an abuse of power. To me, this is a positive sign.

- In your book, you describe the fate of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. For many observers, serious progress on these territorial conflicts is unimaginable. What do you think could be done to break the current stagnation on the issue, if there is anything?

- Unfortunately, most of the opportunities given have been missed over the years. South-Ossetia is now basically behind barbed wire and cut off from the rest of Georgia. It has a population of maybe less than 30.000. Abkhazia has still a much more interesting society, but we have seen increasing isolation over the last ten years and increasing dependence on Russia as well as isolation from Georgia. This situation does not benefit anybody. Neither the Georgians, nor the Abkhaz and possibly not even the Russians, who pay a hefty price for their assistance in Abkhazia. So what can be done to change this? Just having finished a long report on this issue, my only recommendation would be to get much greater international engagement in Abkhazia. This engagement can be done without recognition but offering international assistance in healthcare, environment and the education system would be a start. It is interesting to see if this would still be possible in Abkhazia, and if this would be acceptable to the Abkhaz, but clearly Europe can offer higher quality services with regard to education and healthcare. Obviously, trade is the other big thing that can be offered. Trade across the border with Western Georgia would be important. So that is the only thing, I think, could be done to positively influence the situation. A much bigger international attempt to de-isolate Abkhazia would be necessary but it is much more difficult to do that now then it was ten or fifteen years ago.

Tom de Waal is a senior fellow with Carnegie Europe, specializing in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region. He is the author of numerous publications about the region. His latest book is Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide (Oxford University Press, 2015). He is also the author of the authoritative book on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War (NYU Press, second edition 2013), which has been translated into Armenian, Azeri, Russian, and Turkish, and of The Caucasus: An Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2010). De Waal has worked extensively as a journalist and writer in the Caucasus and Black Sea region and in Russia. From 1993 to 1997, he worked in Moscow for the Moscow Times, the Times of London, and the Economist, specializing in Russian politics and the situation in Chechnya. He is the co-author (with Carlotta Gall) of the book Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus (NYU Press, 1997), for which the authors were awarded the James Cameron Prize for Distinguished Reporting. He has also worked for the BBC and for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, a London-based NGO.

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