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Interview: Stephen Jones

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Professor Stephen F. Jones is a leading western scholar on Georgia and the South Caucasus. He has been a member of faculty at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts since 1989, publishing a number of books and papers on Georgian history and politics during his academic career. His 2012 book *Georgia: A Political History of Independence* is widely viewed as an authoritative text on Georgia’s recent history. He has also briefed the US State Department and a number of US ambassadors to Georgia.

Professor Jones was kind enough to sit down with us this December and answer questions on a number of topics including the 2016 parliamentary elections, the impact of Brexit and the Donald Trump victory on Georgia’s foreign policy ambitions, and the lessons we can learn from Georgia’s independence from the Russian Empire nearly a century ago.

Below is a transcript of our discussion:

GIP: *The elections were widely assessed to be fair by outside observers. However, turnout was very low, less than 52 percent. Georgian Dream won a huge majority even though only about 25 percent of the eligible electorate voted for them. Can we view this outcome positively? Or is it more complicated?*

SJ: Elections are always complicated affairs and they are not always about exercising

your democratic right. In this particular case the elections were conducted reasonably fairly although the result was skewed. The turnout was low, which suggests frustration and disillusion among the Georgian population. Many voters were simply confused about whom to vote for and exhausted by the overly long electoral campaign. This was part of the problem.

Parties weren't clear about their electoral programs. Much of the discussion leading up to the elections was about personal differences, polemical without being informative. In that sense, the elections didn't connect with the Georgian population and its needs. I was surprised, listening to the debates, not to hear more about housing, health, and employment. These are the things at the top of the list of Georgians' concerns, but the parties did not address them. It reflects a continuing disconnect between the parties and the electorate. More positively, the number of women and ethnic minorities elected to parliament went up.

GIP: *You've written about "the growing norm of oligarchic elections dominated by the concerns of 'enlightened elites' and the professional obfuscations of PR managers." How did this characterization fit the Georgian elections?*

SJ: The elections reflect a deep problem: a continuing chasm between Georgian elites and the Georgian population. Parties have no roots in Georgian society. This isn't entirely their fault, it is caused in large part by the fragmentation of post-Soviet Georgian society. There aren't social groups and constituencies that identify with one party or another. Georgians have become politically fragmented which explains why parties come and go.

Parties don't help themselves; they don't have effective internal democratic mechanisms, which are important for maintaining accountability to their

constituents. The parties live in the parliamentary sphere and don't have the organizational capacity, the political will, or the culture for maintaining contacts with the grassroots outside of the electoral cycle. The National Movement is probably the exception, but it seems most successful in mobilizing members for protest, which is not necessarily the best way to ensure influence over the long term. Parties are very active during election time, but aren't effective as representatives between elections. Democracy, or political accountability, is something that must happen between elections too.

GIP: *You've described the two major parties, the National Movement and Georgian Dream, as representing "irreconcilable political styles and visions," referencing the National Movement's preference for rapid reform as compared to the more incremental approach of Georgian Dream.*

SJ: The National Movement is a party associated with rapid political change under [Mikheil] Saakashvili. There are changes going on in the party; we've seen new divisions. Younger faces in the National Movement are looking for a different approach, one that does not include the charismatic style of Saakashvili. That is an indication of growing maturity. On the other hand, I was disappointed with the opening debates in parliament where there was an opportunity to set a new tone. The National Movement missed the chance to represent itself as an opposition able to engage in

concrete and practical ways to improve the Georgian population's situation. Instead, it was the usual polemical battle over personalities and leaders.

Georgian Dream is more moderate in style – though in substance I don't see much difference with the National Movement anymore – but it is eclectic without a clear political personality. We really don't know what kind of party it is yet after the change of the guard in October. It's pro-western, no doubt about that, but what does that mean concretely in terms of a domestic reform program that will improve ordinary people's lives and the government's own legitimacy. Prime minister Kvirikashvili's four-point program for economic growth and political reform includes, vitally, emphases on infrastructure and improvements in governance. But the proof is in the pudding, as the English say. We will have to see whether that will be reflected in legislation or in effective implementation. The biggest problem for Georgian Dream is the temptation that comes with its enormous power over the political system where every political victory could in the end turn out to be a defeat.

GIP: *Do you think the National Movement can become a constructive opposition party? To what extent are they helped, or hurt, by Saakashvili's refusal to step out of the limelight?*

SJ: The National Movement has the potential to be more constructive. That's the intent among younger members of the party,

perhaps. Such a change would be very positive for Georgia, because the polemical battles in parliament resemble the chaos of television debates and undermine the engagement of the Georgian population in the democratic process. The National Movement is right to point out that the shadow power of Ivanishvili is a significant flaw in Georgia's representative democracy – it was even more the case under Saakashvili's charismatic leadership – but this sort of focus is not going to have much impact on the National Movement's political future. There are other issues beyond the big personalities of Saakashvili and Ivanishvili. There are urgent and serious structural economic, political and security problems that Georgia needs to attend to.

GIP: *Should we be concerned that Georgian Dream has a constitutional majority? Should the party itself be wary of overreaching and wearing out its welcome, like the National Movement did during its last few years in office?*

SJ: It's a problem. Benjamin Disraeli declared that any effective government needs a strong opposition. That was a very wise observation. One of the problems in Georgia is the lack of institutional controls over dominant parties. There is a pattern of powerful single parties in Georgian politics, which keeps returning despite interludes of pluralism. That's not always troubling; it occurs in other countries such as Japan, and the US elections have just delivered single party dominance over the executive,

legislature, and through the power of appointment of Supreme Court judges, possibly at the top of the judicial system too. In Georgia, what is important at times like this is the ability of institutional structures, the media and civil society to monitor and resist one-party dominance. I'm not sure that these checks are in place, or if they are, sufficiently strong in Georgia. In this situation, the temptation of power will lead to corruption in the broadest terms, to political stagnation and to a dominant party willing to ignore important lessons and mistakes. This is what Disraeli meant. A weak institutional or political opposition gives the dominant party enough rope to hang itself—politically, I mean. I would not be surprised to see, if in the next couple of years the economic situation does not improve, big protests in the street against a very unpopular government. Let's see what this government can do, but don't anticipate too much.

GIP: *The liberal, pro-western parties, the Free Democrats and Republicans--who were part of the Georgian Dream coalition before leaving in 2014 and 2016, respectively--failed to get into the new parliament. They've essentially been replaced by the Patriots Alliance. What are the likely short-term outcomes of this development, and what are the broader implications?*

SJ: One of the outcomes of these elections was the loss of the liberal center. United, the Republicans and the Free Democrats might have passed that 5% barrier. It was a problem

brought on by the parties themselves. But it goes deeper than that, I suspect. Georgia is still a traditional society where liberalism has shallow roots. Outsiders come to Tbilisi, watch television, hang out in the bars, listen to educated youth, and think the political scene is very Western. But Tbilisi is not Georgia. It is worth noting that in Europe too, liberalism—if we interpret this as tolerance and the support of social justice—is not a universal and natural phenomenon either.

Georgia reflects, in many ways, a deep and complicated transition of values, and a continuing struggle between tradition and modernization. Like the Europeans, Georgians are also reacting to what they perceive as the threats of globalization. The dramatic consequence of the elections, of course, was the disintegration of the Republicans and Free Democrats. Davit Usupashvili is now seeking an alternative political form, one that may combine liberalism with a better understanding of how to represent and incorporate popular concerns and values. This might be the answer. The Republicans, unfortunately, became too obsessed with their own navel.

The Patriots Alliance barely got into parliament. I think its threat value as “pro-Russian” is overrated. That is not why people supported them. They raise important social and economic issues that the other two parties tend to ignore. That is why they succeeded.

GIP: *How are Georgia's ambitions affected by political trends in Western Europe and North America, the most obvious examples being the victory of Donald Trump in the United States and the inward turns in Britain and France?*

SJ: The EU still exists, though it will become less engaged with its neighborhood should the swing to the populist right continue. There will be less money and less commitment to the aspirations of democratic neighbors like Georgia. The Great Experiment has failed in part because, like Georgia's parties, European technocrats don't listen and are not accountable. However, the change for Georgia will come slowly. Populism cannot solve Europe's problems either, so within four years, these illiberals may also be out. The real danger, as I see it, is Europe's simple-minded approach to Russia. It is quite astonishing to see how naïve European leaders still are after what has happened in the last 25 years (Transdniestria, Georgia, Ukraine). Donald Trump belongs to that camp. His new secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, has had close relations with Putin, and Trump believes he can cut deals with Putin. He doesn't believe, like the CIA does, that Putin had anything to do with the hacking of US party institutions. This is not good for Georgia. One can only hope the Republican Congress is more realistic, along with a US State Department and US intelligence community that's aware of the dangers of a country that brazenly interferes in US elections. Russia has always done that to its neighbors, but Putin is becoming more

confident; he can get away with anything as long as he faces no resistance. He learned from Lenin who declared, "when you stick the bayonet in, push as long as you encounter mush, and only pull back when you hit something hard."

GIP: *You do a lot of research on the first Georgian Republic, which lasted from 1918 to 1921. What are the lessons of Georgia's experience during those years that are still useful to us today?*

SJ: History always has lessons to teach us, though we don't always listen or observe. I am working on the first republic now, and there are at least four issues that have strong parallels with today: the threat from the North, the inability of Georgia to adequately integrate its national minorities, economic weakness, and trust in Europe's commitment. The situation is far better than in 1918-21, but the first republic is a reminder of the instabilities that can be brought on by Georgians' own mistakes and delusions. However, there are positive parallels, which tells us something about Georgians over the last 100 years and why they are so resilient. In 1918, as today, Georgians supported democracy and they fought hard to create a constitutional state. One hopes they can continue on this path and maybe teach some Europeans about the folly of illiberal populism at the same time.

GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

