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## EXPERT INTERVIEW

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### Interview with Journalist Régis Genté

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*“We underestimate how strongly [Marine] Le Pen is supported within the population. She has a very serious chance to win.”*

**Régis Genté** is a French journalist who has covered the former Soviet Union since 2002, writing for publications including *Le Figaro* and *Radio France Internationale*. He has published two books, *Voyage au pays des Abkhazes* (2011) and *Poutine et le Caucase* (2014).

M. Genté was kind enough to sit down with us and answer questions about Georgia’s position in French foreign policy debates as well as the impact this year’s French presidential elections will have on France, Georgia, and beyond.

Below is a transcript of our discussion:

**GIP:** *We know that Georgia is not a high priority for France’s foreign policy establishment. However, France has supported Georgia’s territorial integrity under the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. So, how exactly is Georgia viewed in France’s foreign policy establishment?*

**RG:** Indeed, Georgia is not a top priority but when we speak about the view from France, we speak about Russia and NATO as well as the EU. Mostly Russia is the focus for politicians, diplomats,

security people, and so on, in France. The 2008 war was an important moment. First, because it was a world event; second, because France, by chance, happened to have at the moment the rotating presidency of the EU. The French president was Sarkozy, who really was energetic and proactive.

Georgia became very visible, we understood how these questions related to Russia, to the behavior of Russia. What happened after, the political line from France was constant and clear: we—France—support Georgia’s territorial integrity. This was

repeated when Sarkozy and Hollande visited after the war. The question is about—and this is the difference between the candidates in the upcoming elections—NATO enlargement and what we do with Russia. Should we confront? Should we make Russia a kind of partner?

Usually, the ruling parties—whether from the right or the left—are quite clear on that. They are really supportive of NATO and of Georgia’s territorial integrity. Everybody understands this is not the time for NATO enlargement and EU enlargement. Still, the French leadership is often sympathetic to the idea. But sometimes, for example the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the highest-level decision makers can be favorable on this issue and, however, take a decision going in the opposite direction, whether to take the same position as Germany or for other national interest considerations.

**GIP:** *You have lived here since 2002, so you’ve observed a lot of changes in Georgia. Could you briefly comment on how changes in Georgia have been reflected in the perceptions of French government officials?*

**RG:** Indeed, there was a feeling that Georgia had to be helped; there were no really negative views of Georgia during the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili’s time. [Government] mandates were perceived as positive as real reforms.

The personality of Saakashvili was more criticized, again for the same reason: he was perceived as too confrontational toward Russia and there were debates about it in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example. But, despite that, there was sympathy for Georgia and an understanding of why Georgia wanted to break with Russia and escape from the post-Soviet world. France supported.

When the new [Georgian Dream] government came in in 2012, France was careful to stay out of the debate. Certainly, there was talk of how we didn’t know this oligarch who was controlling much of the political arena in Georgia, and where he aimed to bring Georgia.

Despite that, France continued to support Georgia. It was also welcomed that Georgia was continuing its integration with Europe, for example on the visa issue. France also worked to contribute to that. France blocked things too, for example because of issues about migration. I would say, Georgia’s direction globally is seen positively from France.

**GIP:** *Let’s talk about the French presidential election scheduled for April. The first candidate to discuss is Marine Le Pen of the National Front. She is usually described using terms like “right-wing populist” and “extreme nationalist.” How do you define her ideological platform?*

**RG:** Le Pen does not want to be seen as extreme right. She knows it is her main problem in terms of image and her speeches are focusing on anti-

globalization and anti-liberalism. For example, on the economy, she is very leftist, whereas her father was very liberal economically. So, this is a big shift, and she is managing to pull in lots of people, something like 30 percent of people who used to vote for the extreme left, for example. Even now it's very possible that some people will vote for a candidate from the extreme left on the first round and then vote for Le Pen in the second.

She is first in the polls so far, with 26-27 percent intending to vote for her, while [Emmanuel] Macron is a bit behind at the moment, with 25 percent. Some polls show that Macron is first. She is leading for some years now, because of some deep changes in French society after the 2008 global financial crisis, and more recently because of what is happening with François Fillon and revelations about corruption. He [Fillon] is far behind at the moment, according to polls, around 18%.

I think that we underestimate how strongly Le Pen is supported within the population. She might get more support than we expect, I fear. She is—I'm not supporting her, but I have to say—a very clever politician. Not smart but clever. She acts very well as a politician; the messages she addresses, the positions she takes in the political arena, as a populist candidate but not only [as a populist candidate]. For example, when she became head of her political party, she understood the main problem was that the party was seen as extreme

right. Her father [Jean-Marie Le Pen] denied the existence of the Shoah [Holocaust]. Very nasty things.

She has not really broken with that past, but she does not say anything wrong in the public sphere. She almost never has racist words in her mouth and people around her are under control. She is working to de-demonize her party and show that she is a responsible figure. This is why she has this much support.

She addresses the anguish of the French people and instrumentalizes it. For example, the problem of employment—which is problem number one in France and very much underestimated, because we have lots of people who are officially employed but really are unemployed. This goes along with problems of identity, migration, and so on.

Also, because Europe is at the moment extremely criticized, she has promised to organize a referendum on the issue: to leave the EU and the Eurozone. I don't know to what extent she would actually do that if she wins power, but she will probably try to deliver on those promises and it will have major resonance for countries like Georgia. The EU will be under threat of collapse, followed by NATO.

That's why I think—but I am quite in the minority—that she has a very serious chance to win. Nobody believed that three years ago, but now no one excludes that she could win. What is

happening in France is happening worldwide: in the US, the UK. I don't know why France would be outside of history. There are these big waves which are shaking the world; I don't understand why they should not shake us in France. For example, part of public opinion is violently against institutions such as the mainstream media (having tremendous trust in alternative news), the politicians, even the Court. [Russian President] Mr. Putin became a model to some parts of the society. This is also why I say that Le Pen is underestimated and we might have a bad surprise the morning after the first round of elections.

**GIP:** *What about Le Pen's stance on NATO and EU enlargement, including her stance on Russia's annexation of Crimea. What are the implications for Georgia's territorial integrity?*

**RG:** If Le Pen is elected president, the impact on Georgia will be greater in comparison to the other candidates. But Mr. Fillon may be. She positions herself as anti-globalist, which means taking an anti-American position, something which is important for France. Anti-Americanism is a usual part of the debate. She is giving a kind of blind support to Russia: accepting everything including the annexation of Crimea, and accepting the idea that Crimea always belonged to Russia.

She will align with Russia if elected president. She got a loan from a Russian bank that's very close to the Kremlin. So, yes, she will try to counterbalance the American alliance with something with Russia,

which will probably be quite substantial. This means that on questions of whether to support Georgia, EU enlargement, NATO enlargement and so on, she will probably be opposed to all of them.

**GIP:** *Take Le Pen's approach towards Russia. Is this primarily driven by the desire to make France a power center independent of both the US and Russia? But counterbalancing American power in Europe, can France create more space to pursue an independent policy?*

**RG:** Yes, this is what she says. Europe is led by neoliberalism, by the big companies which happen to mostly be American, she constantly underlines. The idea is to counterbalance. If we are in alliance with Russia, we can more easily counterbalance the Americans, big corporations, and liberalism in general. This focus on anti-globalization and anti-liberalism sees Russia and Putin as an obvious ally. That's the primary focus. Which is quite naïve about Russia; that she know almost nothing, because she ignores how Russia is dreaming to be compared to the US as a superpower.

**GIP:** *Let's discuss [independent candidate] Emmanuel Macron. What's his ideological platform? His foreign policy stance?*

**RG:** It's not impossible that in the coming days he'll take the lead in some polls. He's just behind Le Pen. His opponents want to depict him as a fake product and an undeclared Socialist Party candidate. This goes back to problems with

François Hollande. When Hollande was elected, he was elected with the support of the leftists in his party [the Socialist Party]. But he thought the only way to get France out of economic crisis, meaning creating jobs, was to have a quite liberal economic policy. He is supported by many CEOs of our biggest companies.

Macron may be like Hollande without links to the leftists, more liberal and seeking to make markets more open and to create jobs that way. Ideologically he is not far to the right or to the left. He tries to play with the idea that he is an outsider. He has some ideas. He is an economist. However, he is trying to fit more social measures into his program.

**GIP:** *In terms of Macron's foreign policy, where can we place him in the context of previous French presidents?*

**RG:** In terms of foreign policy, he would be very pro-European, understanding that there has to be something more than just economic concerns driving integration. This is what he criticizes about Europe—pro-European figures are seen as serving big money and not having any real political agenda. But I'm really not sure that he is about to go against that, being himself supported by the big money pockets in France. His views are probably quite in line with the status quo.

It's not really clear, however. For example, he went to Moscow last year and promised to work with the

Russians, so he wants to be more of a figure in favor of compromise, even if we are speaking about lifting sanctions. Maybe to please Putin but maybe to please French companies that are suffering because of the sanctions. It's difficult to say, but I think he would be more in line with previous policy, quite pro-NATO, pro-Europe, and pro-liberal, trying to correct policies a little bit, but not that much.

**GIP:** *Let's speak about François Fillon from the Republican Party. If he is the next president of France, what we should expect his foreign policy to look like?*

**RG:** His foreign policy is contradictory. He is obviously trying to build a good relationship with Putin and to restore dialogue with Russia. He supports Crimea's annexation. But in the meantime, he repeated that our allies are the Westerners, the US, NATO. How would he manage to do keep that so-called balance, it's not clear.

**GIP:** *Macron is an independent. Le Pen leads a party that was viewed as on the fringe as recently as a few years ago. Fillon is from the Republican Party. The Socialist Party candidate [Benoît Hamon] does not appear to have a chance of winning the presidency. Does this mean that France's two-party system is broken?*

**RG:** Good question. Exactly. Macron wants to position himself by saying "I am neither from the

right nor from the left.” He is pushing the Socialist Party toward implosion. The Socialist Party is about to split because it has two ideologies, one very leftist and one which says we are realistic. Fillon’s party might also be about to split. This election could bring a major redistribution of the parties.

**GIP:** *Will we go to run-off?*

**RG:** Sure.

**GIP:** *And the runoff will be between Le Pen and either Macron or Fillon?*

**RG:** Yes, probably Macron.

**GIP:** *If we get to the runoff and its Le Pen against one of the other candidates, who is most likely to be the next president of France?*

**RG:** As I said, Le Pen has a big chance of winning. Things have changed. Not only radical leftists but even some from the Socialist and Republican parties will say “I will not vote for Fillon or for Macron.” Even some voters from the left will vote for Le Pen, and many people will abstain. Le Pen, I say, also because she tries to be presentable. She has succeeded because she is less seen as a danger, or, if she is, not that big of one. Some will look at her and say: “ok, let’s try.”

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## GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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