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Interview: Lincoln Mitchell

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“On terms of security, Georgia’s best hope is still NATO and the United States. But now, whenever the president speaks about NATO, we now ask, is he going to affirm American support for Article 5?”

Lincoln Mitchell a scholar and political development professional with significant expertise in democracy, political development, and the former Soviet Union. His current research interests include democratic rollback in the US, US-Georgia relations, political development in the former Soviet Union, the role of democracy promotion in American foreign policy and the future of baseball. His third book, [The Democracy Promotion Paradox](#), was published by Brookings Institution Press in 2016.

GIP: *Donald Trump entered office with a deserved reputation as a Vladimir Putin sympathizer and a Kremlin sympathizer. That led many observers to speculate that the US would vacate its role as a provider of security in the South Caucasus. That hasn’t happened, at least not yet. Why?*

LM: Two reasons come to mind. The first is that it is difficult for American foreign policy to make dramatic changes quickly. The experience of every modern American president is that they come to Washington and then realize the entropy around the

foreign policy establishment is very strong and they have a small bandwidth with which to operate.

The other point is that in the international press and in the American press there has been an effort to conceal how incapacitated this president is. For example, this is someone who can’t process new information, who really cannot read briefing materials. That affects the ability to staff up.

The consensus about Russia in the United States is so deep, so strong, that it’s hard to

find foreign policy people to staff those positions. If you look at his [President Trump's] short list for secretary of state, if he had put one of those other people in there, let's say Mitt Romney. Mitt Romney is a Russia hawk, so Romney never would have gone along with this. He brought in somebody who was probably more sympathetic to Trump's views on Putin, Rex Tillerson. But Tillerson doesn't know what he's doing. That has made it difficult to implement a program.

GIP: *What is your interpretation of vice president Mike Pence's scheduled visit to Georgia later this month? What's his motivation? What do you expect to happen during his visit?*

LM: Now I'm going to look at it from Tbilisi's perspective. They are very concerned. They do have friends in the Trump administration. One of them is the secretary of defense, one of them is the national security adviser, one of them is the vice president. On domestic issues, Mike Pence is a radical bigot and it's disgusting that someone like that holds national office. On international issues, he's a conventional Republican hawk. He's probably never met a strategic airstrike he didn't like, never met a defense department spending increase he didn't like.

From that perspective, he is a friend of Georgia, so it's good that he's coming here. It's an opportunity to tell someone who is supportive of Georgia about all the good

things Georgia is doing, all of the bilateral cooperation between our two countries. That is great. Pence doesn't know a lot about that yet. It is an opportunity for Georgia to get in with the right guy in the right way. So, I'm pleased about that. However, vice presidential influence always varies.

At the end of the day, Pence will have influence, kind of. He's not going to be setting the administration's policy on Russia. This is an administration where a lot of people are in informal roles. This is a sultanistic regime, and Pence, for all of his political skill—he is a good and smart and effective politician—is not family. The Trump-Kushner clan has a lot of money tied up in Russia. That's what is really driving this. Pence has no counter to that.

GIP: *While the executive branch has sent mixed signals regarding Russia, NATO, and Georgia, the legislative branch has been more assertive. Republicans in Congress continue to strongly support Georgia. Last month the Senate passed the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act, which makes specific reference to Georgia: it acknowledges that Russia continues to ignore the terms of the August 2008 ceasefire agreement and it requires the US president to call on Russia to withdraw from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. My question is: can Congress push the executive branch to maintain the status quo via Georgia? How optimistic – or pessimistic – are you about the future of US-Georgia relations?*

LM: Congress does a lot of things. But a big story in the United States is that Congress

has abdicated its role as a check on executive power. The reason I'm saying that is because if Congress still performed that role, Trump wouldn't be in office. All of these people say they want to defend Georgia, they think Putin is bad and terrible. If they are Democrats, they are effectively powerless. They can cast a protest vote as a minority but they're not making congressional decisions. If they are Republicans, they knowingly allowed someone with these views toward Russia to get elected, with this relationship toward Russia during the campaign. I say knowingly because they were briefed by the CIA chief about it.

I want to be clear on why they did this. One, it was for the pedestrian reasons that they wanted to hold onto their jobs and their committee chairs. And two, because they wanted lower taxes for their rich friends. Georgia is a lower priority for those people—John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio—Georgian sovereignty is a lower priority for them than being in the majority in the Senate. Any one of these people back in August could have been a hero. Today they could be a hero. If Marco Rubio said, "enough is enough. We're getting to the bottom of this if we have to impeach everybody", he could be the next president of the United States. That easy. But no, these are timid people.

What Congress has done [with relation to Georgia] is good. It's better than not doing it. But it might be the political equivalent of hush money.

GIP: *Most people in Tbilisi argue that, for all its faults, the National Movement was much better at playing the Washington lobbying game than is Georgian Dream. Have members of Georgian Dream improved in this regard? How would you advise the current government to go about getting more support from Washington?*

LM: To say the United National Movement was better at lobbying in Washington is like saying that Zaza Pachulia is a better basketball player than Kakha Kaladze. Georgian Dream doesn't really lobby in Washington, while for the National Movement it was the center of who they were. However, the problem the National Movement had is, toward the end, they didn't realize that they weren't getting the traction they thought they were. What I was hearing from people who were better placed than me is that towards the end, the United States was not going to sell weapons to Georgia because they were concerned about the erratic behavior of the president [Saakashvili].

Right now, if I were advising the Georgian government on a strategy in Washington I would say lay a little low. Be careful here. Some of the things the ambassador is doing now are really smart. Building relationships widely. The ambassador is getting out of Washington, going to other parts of the country to tell people about Georgia. If you go to a secondary media market, let's say Chattanooga, Tennessee, and give a speech there, that's all anyone has heard about Georgia. And now they've heard it from a well-spoken, smart ambassador. Now

you've made allies. That's a good strategy that Georgia is pursuing.

If you're from New York, like me, you've known this for 20 years: If you fly too close to Donald Trump, you get burned. He chews you up and spits you out. But in the eyes of the Georgian government and the Georgian people, they are in some ways better prepared to understand Donald Trump because they've seen this before. This is the Aliyevs with orange hair.

But you have to be careful with that [dealing with President Trump]. The level of hatred toward Donald Trump in the United States is intense, and that's a very difficult political landscape to navigate. The fundamental challenge facing the Georgian government is to shift the paradigm in this way: We start by asking, "is this new American administration good for Georgia. Will they veer toward Georgia or will they veer toward Russia?" Those were the same questions I was asked when Barack Obama came to power. That's normal with a new president who is relatively unknown and whose interest in foreign policy had not been toward this part of the world. But with Obama, we pretty much knew what was coming.

The question now for Georgia is what you do with a country that has been your biggest patron, your most powerful ally, that is experiencing democratic rollback and may be moving towards political instability? What does that mean? How engaged can the United States be with secondary questions

internationally when that is happening domestically? I'm not an alarmist. I tend to downplay things. However, I am a political scientist. We are experiencing democratic rollback in the United States. I've lived in the States for a long time, and I've never seen political instability like this. I have never seen the outright bigotry that you see now, that people now feel empowered to harass someone because they're Muslim, because they're Mexican, because they're African American, because they're Jewish, because they're gay. George W. Bush, probably the most conservative president in American history, after 9/11 was very clear about what this meant for our thinking about Islam: that we should respect our Muslim fellow citizens.

The potential for instability that this leads to could be very real. I'm not talking about civil war or people shooting each other in the streets. What I'm talking about is the federal government not being seen as legitimate, election outcomes being questioned a lot. Those are problems in the United States that are going to be much bigger than are we taking a strong enough position on helping, let's say, Nicaragua so they don't recognize the independence of Abkhazia anymore.

GIP: *You previously wrote on your blog that Georgia should work to diversify its foreign policy relationships in response to the US no longer being a reliable partner. You also mentioned breaking out of the US-Russia binary, a dynamic that has really grown stale for Georgia. In particular, what opportunities for diversification do you see? How attractive is China as a strategic partner?*

LM: I think that the key to that is economic. As China invests more in Georgia, now a very powerful country, much more powerful than Russia actually, that has a stake in Russia not invading Georgia. That is a very powerful thing. You can expand that to other countries, as well.

On terms of security, Georgia's best hope is still NATO and the United States. But now, whenever the president [of the United States] speaks about NATO, we now ask, is he going to affirm American support for Article 5? NATO was established under President Truman. There were a lot of presidents between Truman and Obama, and that was never a question. It's a question now. What that means is that the future of NATO is more complicated.

This isn't a Bush or Obama situation where the position was clear. I have not heard a statement from Rex Tillerson about territorial integrity of the kind you heard all the time from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, or Hillary Clinton, or John Kerry. That's significant.

GIP: *How would you assess the success of Georgia's current policy of pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration while taking pains not to appear hostile to Russia's geopolitical interests? Is it working? It is sustainable in the long term, given that Russia appears committed to permanently occupying Abkhazia and South Ossetia?*

LM: One of the many difficult things for Georgia is that there is a line that says what Putin learned from the war in Georgia in 2008 and creation of fake independent states in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, followed six years later by the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine, what Putin learned was that the West wasn't going to stand up to him. I don't disagree with that but I'm not sure that it's the best way to look at it. Another way to look at it is that the West couldn't stand up to him. What Putin learned is that the tools the West has aren't enough to stop something like that if he really wants to do it.

To bring this back to Georgia, what this means is that Putin has learned that the West is not going to push him out of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I think he knew that before; he certainly knows that now. You can blame Barack Obama, but frankly that's unsophisticated partisanship. It's not serious analysis. What is serious analysis is that we don't have a lot of tools here.

I think Georgia has some tools. If you ask me: "Will Putin roll tanks into Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi?" My answer is no. He does not want to occupy Georgia. He may

not care about his international reputation, but he knows the Georgian people aren't going to take that lying down.

Now, to your question about the Georgian government's approach. They don't have a lot of good options. They are choosing the least bad option. If you ground your foreign policy in reality as opposed to ideological fantasy, you have to recognize that. The other approaches led to a conflict where the situation hardened and it was much worse for Georgia. What we have now is a situation that is bad for Georgia. The moving of the border, the occasional kidnapping. These are terrible things. This is a foreign power doing this with essentially no accountability. It is better than some of the other alternatives.

If I were sitting in this administration, I would be desperately thinking up new approaches. To recognize that allies have different incentives. Georgia's incentive is to restore its territorial integrity. The West's incentive is to minimize this conflict. We need to recognize that. If you're Georgia, how do you get what you want? The West can live with what we have now. What we can't live with is Russian tanks going down Rustaveli Avenue. So, we can live with this. Georgia probably can't. Solving this problem is an A-list priority for Georgia, it is a B-list priority for a normal, functioning [American] administration regardless of party, and it is a D-list priority for an administration that doesn't even know how to make priorities.

GIP: *If the occupation ends, if Russia pulls out, it won't be due to external pressure or to any policy that Georgia pursues. It would be due to internal shifts within Russia. We can't predict that and I think it's unlikely to happen. At what point does the political class in Georgia, if they haven't already done this in private, admit that the occupied territories will not come back under Tbilisi's control?*

LM: It's very difficult to do that, because the political cost is so high. For the past five years, the major opposition party, their main attack point was that the governing party was a Russian stooge. They weren't getting much traction with that, but it got under Georgian Dream's skin. That's what's stopping them from doing that.

This exchange, what you and I both just said, the hawkish side of Georgian social media will be calling us Russian stooges within 48 hours of this article coming out. For saying something that most rational westerners would nod their heads at. That is still the political climate in Georgia.

The problem right now though, is that the Abkhaz really do want independence. I won't speak for South Ossetia because I think it's more complicated. Georgia wants a kind of classical sovereignty with autonomous regions. There's got to be a compromise. Can it be UN administered? Is there some way to do this? But no one is thinking like that. I had high-level conversations with very smart people in the previous [US] administration who said that to me, but they said it's not worth it for us to

make this fight with Georgia. Because right now, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, they can live with this.

GIP: *I'd appreciate if you could weigh in on the two recent cases involving the Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarli and the Turkish schoolteacher Mustafa Emre Chabuk. Are these cases indicative of a lack of strategic leverage on the part of Georgia vis-a-vis its neighbors?*

LM: Obviously from a human rights angle these are both pretty terrible things. I wonder, though, whether the global uncertainty makes Georgia feel less empowered to stand up to its two more powerful neighbors. And I wonder whether we can start a conversation about Georgia's need to diversify its foreign policy, and then say Georgia must stand up to its two neighbors on this issue. I don't have the answer to that question.

GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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