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# EXPERT INTERVIEW

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**Georgia After the 2020 Parliamentary Elections**

**Expert Interview with Dr. Neil MacFarlane**

Interview by Nino Samkharadze, GIP Junior Policy Analyst

*„As for EU policy towards Georgia, I personally think that the evolution of your relationship will be a long process. And the best thing that Georgians can do to push that along is internal development of internal institutions.“*

**Professor Neil MacFarlane** is a specialist on Russian foreign policy and the regional dynamics of the former Soviet Union, with particular reference to that region’s southern tier. Since 1996 is the first Lester B. Pearson Professor of International Relations. From 2005 to 2010 he was Head of the Department of Politics and International Relations. From 2008 to 2010 he was Deputy Head of the Social Sciences Division at Oxford. He was a member of the Council of the University and served on numerous University committees. He was an associate research fellow in the Russia-Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and he chaired the board of the Center for Social Sciences, Tbilisi, Georgia.

Professor MacFarlane was kind enough to join us in an online discussion via zoom platform and answer questions about Georgia’s democratic development after the 2020 parliamentary elections, geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus, and the impact of the presidential election in the United States.

Below is a transcript of our discussion:

*NS: Professor MacFarlane, let me start our conversation with the domestic political situation in Georgia. Should we be concerned that the ruling party has maintained power for a third consecutive term? Should we be worried that their governing approach might tend toward a relatively non-democratic stance in the upcoming four years?*

**NM:** First of all, I would say that three terms itself is not really an obvious problem. Many democratic countries have gone through several decades of rule by a single party. That's because the people chose them, and then eventually it shifts. So I don't really think that the issue of a third transition is a problem. I also think that in terms of Georgia's stability and development there's probably some reason to have continuity in government.

Second, that there is some reason, particularly in Georgia's situation, to want a stable forward movement. Let's say you got the UNM [United National Movement] rather than Georgian Dream, that's the alternative trajectory, and if you think about it, that alternative trajectory is, to my mind, very uncertain as opposed to the Georgian Dream. The other side, however, is that governments that stay in power for a long time, they tend towards abuse and also overconfidence, and that is a risk. I'm not saying that Georgian Dream shows that yet, but the longer it goes, the more renewal is necessary.

*NS: The main opposition parties are indicating fraud, they boycotted the second round of the elections and refused to occupy seats in the parliament. Are these developments alarming factors for the competitive environment in Georgian politics? Do you see any face-saving solutions for dealing with the existing stalemate between the ruling party and the opposition?*

**NM:** What we're talking about is not a specifically Georgian problem. What you're talking about is a standard question, which is: does the opposition accept the legitimacy of electoral processes or not? This is true in the United States, by the way. I mean, we have a president who appears to be ending his term as president. And he is resisting this and he's saying it was all fraud, all rigged. And the general view in the United States is that this is potentially deeply destabilizing for American democracy.

Let's go back to Georgia. I think the same rule applies: if you have an opposition party that doesn't want to participate in the game, as has been constitutionally defined, but wants to go outside the Constitution and resist, maybe they have justifiable reasons for doing so. But I think it is obvious that it is deeply damaging to the emerging constitutionalism of Georgia. Now, as to face-saving endeavors, with great respect to the former president, Misha Saakashvili, I don't think he's interested in face-saving. I think he's interested in resistance and in discrediting the government and in replacing it. If that is the position of UNM – and I realize that UNM is rather complex constellation of different forces – but if that's the bottom line, there is no face saving.

*NS: As a follow up question, do you see Mikhail Saakashvili's stance as the main determinant of the current stance of the opposition parties?*

**NM:** I think that, like President Trump, he has a lot of popular mobilization capability. And as for the others, people like Bokeria, there have been tensions. My sense is that from the perspective of the broader UNM, which includes several pieces, they all have their own interests. And Misha is useful to them, but if he becomes no longer useful to them, then they will abandon him. But the bottom line with regard to this electoral process,

from my perspective, is that they all had a common objective. And that common objective was getting rid of Georgian Dream and going back to their 'glorious past,' but that failed. So, they reject the status quo. The question is, are they willing to act outside the Constitution? And that I just don't know.

*NS: By 2024, four years from now, Georgia has scheduled the introduction of a fully proportional system instead of the [current] mixed proportional one. What do you think the chances are that the amendments can push Georgian party politics to be more pluralistic? What will be the implications of those amendments for the Georgian party system?*

**NM:** I think that one of the positive benefits of a fully proportional electoral system is that it is inclusive rather than exclusive. And I think that is just as true in Georgia as it is in, say, Belgium. And so I think intrinsically it is a good system, particularly when you start looking at your divided representation system with majoritarian seats and then also a party list, I mean, this is just internally contradictory. Either you accept that the people should have an equal voice throughout the country and that those voices should be represented in an equitable way in the parliament, or you don't.

The other side of it is that if you have a purely proportional system, you end up dividing or potentially dividing power amongst a very large number of parties, all of whom get rather small percentages of the vote – if the election is free and fair, by the way. And that makes governing more difficult. And so the question for Georgia is, does it have resilience, professionalism and professional development in its civil service? I think, in principle, proportional representation makes the system more democratic.

*NS: Now let me ask a question regarding the new geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus. Recently, significant events took place. Azerbaijan found a short-run military solution by taking the strategically-important [city of] Shusha after which Nikol Pashinian surrendered and signed a peace deal, as a result of which the presence of Russian peacekeepers increased in the region. Should we see these developments as a threat to Georgia's geopolitical position and strategic goals of Euro-Atlantic integration?*

**NM:** The Russians got what they wanted. They have a Russian-led peacekeeping force in and around Karabakh. And by the way, given that nobody else was coming to that party and nobody else was attempting to mediate a solution for the people of Karabakh – of all kinds, Azerbaijani and Armenian - this is probably not an ideal solution, but it's the best one available. I mean, who else would do this? And if nobody else came to this party, how long would the killing continue? So, I'm very nervous about the reintroduction of Russian forces into Azerbaijan and the consequences in terms of Armenian defense and foreign policy and also the consequences for Azerbaijan, because this is a lever of influence over Azerbaijan.

About Georgia, there has been a consistent view in Georgia's definition of its own interests that you want to minimize the Russian role in the Southern Caucasus. I think that's pretty straightforward. And this outcome strengthens Russia's role in the Southern Caucasus. We have a large Russian base at Gumri in Armenia, and we have a fairly sizable peacekeeping force, which is Russian, in Azerbaijan, around Karabakh. What country is between those places and Russia itself? Georgia. Russia may want reasonably easy access by land to its ground forces in Armenia and in Azerbaijan. And the easiest way to do that is through Georgia.

I'm not a conspiracy theorist, by the way. It's just an obvious objective problem for them. But the other thing that comes to mind in this context is the Russian-Turkish relationship because the Armenians say that Turkey is the major threat strategically to them and not Russia. And if you look at the conflict itself, what you see is Turkey being fully supportive of Azerbaijan, not least in terms of military equipment, but also in terms of technical support, and thirdly, in terms of, allegedly, the introduction of volunteers into Azerbaijan to participate in the conflict itself. Now then you take a look at Russia, which has an alliance and a strategic relationship with Armenia and a major base there, which is the fundamental point of their entire operation dealing with the Middle East. They may have trouble managing this contradiction.

*NS: You perfectly described these new risky circumstances circled around us. Can I dig deeper into how this new situation will put pressure on Georgia's European integration ambitions? Will it be as problematic as it seems at the first glance?*

**NM:** I think there are two aspects. One is what is going on in Brussels, and the other is what is going on in the Caucasus and around Georgia. In as much as we take the enlargement document of NATO seriously, Georgia already had problems because it was supposed to resolve all these internal disputes before [attaining a membership perspective]. The other problem is issues with neighbors. In other words, a fundamental point here, is that NATO doesn't really want to expand into areas where their expansion might generate conflict. So what does this mean with regard to Georgia's aspirations towards European integration? I don't think it means much. I really don't think that there is much immediate prospect of membership in NATO or [membership in the

EU]. That was true prior to the events of 2008, and certainly after the events of 2008. It is true now. And I don't think the Karabakh case makes much difference, but let's be positive. If you look at the partnership route, I mean, this is a great ambiguity, partnership can be shallow or deep. Georgia is in the medium part of that spectrum. It can go deeper, but as it goes, and I think it will go deeper, the one thing in the minds of both the European Union and NATO will be, how far can we go without creating a mess for: a) for Georgia; and b) for us?

*NS: Just to get back to the Nagorno-Karabakh case and its dimensions: does the development of the conflict in this way mean that international mediating formats, such as the Minsk Group, have lost their efficiency?*

**NM:** I have followed the Minsk process since 1992, and I never expected much of it. The last 28 years of history have demonstrated that there wasn't much to expect out of Minsk. So I don't think they're losing their position. I really don't think they actually ever had much position to begin with, for two reasons. There was no consensus amongst the major states in the Minsk group – that is to say Russia, France, and the United States – on what to do together to generate momentum towards peace. And the second [reason] was Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves. The principal parties in the Karabakh conflict have very serious domestic political constraints. And unsurprisingly, if both sides have spent 30 years saying to their own populations, no retreat and no surrender, it becomes rather difficult to surrender. Armenia is: a) smaller than Azerbaijan; and b) less wealthy than Azerbaijan. The evolving contrasts between the two countries alter the regional balance between them. If the balance of power shifts to benefit of one side, eventually, in the absence of a peaceful settlement, you may get a

return to war. That is what just happened. The other major destabilizing factor is Turkey. I think that the Azerbaijani armed forces probably could have made a fair amount of progress on their own because of their weight and also because of their armament anyway, but the Turkish assistance, particularly in the area of aerial warfare, that is to say drones, made a big difference. And it wasn't only Turkey, it was probably also Israel. The basic point would be that this has been resolved not through a mediation process, but through the use of force. So that would mean that the Minsk group is effectively obsolete anyway. The second point is, did it lose influence? I don't really think it had much influence anyway, ever.

*NS: Let me finalize this part about the region itself and broaden the international context and its implications for Georgia. In 2015, you wrote about the complicated environment in terms of foreign policy which Georgian Dream had to deal with. In particular, you mentioned the goal of balancing relations with Russia and the West. Looking at the broader picture now, after eight years, do you see that Georgian Dream has been effective with this goal? Was the government successful in balancing its relations with two big powers?*

**NM:** My reference point for the Georgian Dream government is the UNM government before. If balance between the West and Russia is important for Georgia, I think we would agree that the UNM did a bad job on that because of its excessive focus on the West and continual insult of Russia. The 2008 war was the result. It wasn't just a result of NATO. It was a result of the fact that the Russians were irritated by the UNM and by President Saakashvili. So, what does that mean for your question? Relatively speaking, I think the current government has done much better at achieving an effective balance. Trade resumed, transport

reopened, and the rhetoric was dialed down. The Russians, I think, are much more comfortable with the Georgia of today than they were with the Georgia of 2008 to state the obvious. This is good. There are certain qualifications here. For example, what about diplomatic relations? There are no official diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia. Why? That would be because, rightly, the Georgian government does not want to accept the consequences of bilateral recognition because there would be a price. And the price might, for example, include the re-introduction of Russian troops into Georgia outside the occupied territories, and the establishment of military transport corridors through Georgia to Armenia and western Azerbaijan. Independence and self-determination are a slippery slope. It's a dilemma because I think that it would be very much in Georgia's interest to have a deeper and [more] constructive relationship with Russia. But the other side of it is how you do that with Russia. Russia is an imperialist power and it thinks that Georgia really belongs to it, and that the so-called 'sovereignty' of its neighbors is not really sovereignty. So, I understand the limitations on achieving a more normal balance with Russia. On the other hand, going back to a point I made earlier, the more successful Georgia is in tilting towards the West, the more difficult the Russian problem for Georgia insecurity will become. I don't envy the people who were involved in this at all. It's a very tough one to call, but we learned in 2008 that if you step over the line, then you get slapped. And so the question is, how close can you get to the line without stepping over it from a Georgian perspective? And I think, on balance, the Georgian Dream government has done that pretty well. I have many issues with the Georgian Dream government, but this is not one of them.

*NS: With the second question, I would move to the changes in the U.S. How might Georgia's*

*ambitions of Westernization and Western integration be affected by the victory of Biden over Trump in the United States? Do you expect any changes in U.S. foreign policy towards Georgia or this region?*

**NM:** Well, if we're talking about the large region, which I take to be Europe, I think there will be a change. I think that the foreign policy establishment in the United States, and Biden specifically, and Blinken [Biden's nominee for secretary of state] are strongly Atlanticist. That is to say they reject "America First." And so I expect that there will be reengagement with NATO, and a more reasoned relationship with the European Union. Now, what does it mean for the smaller region, the Caucasus? It really goes back to the earlier question. There are many obstacles in terms of a more robust and deeper integrative arrangement with the countries of the Caucasus. In terms of America's foreign policy and America's position in the world, the last four years have been a disaster, that's clear. In terms of the atmospherics of the Caucasian relationship with the States, I think they will improve for Georgia and for Armenia. But probably not for Azerbaijan.

Georgia is known in America to be a consistent and supportive friend of the United States. So I think you will have a smoother ride with the Americans as of the 20th of January, 2021. And on the assumption that the will of the people is actually respected in the final result and the transition, I think it will be easier, but I wouldn't expect there to be a dramatic change. If you look at the Caucasus, I think that they will be supportive in discourse, as they have been, by the way, but I wouldn't expect much change in their practice. I mean, I think it was Obama who made clear that the Caucasus was a European issue and not a transatlantic issue. I expect they will continue with that. On the other hand, I expect that

in terms of U.S. economic and development engagement with Georgia, I think that will probably improve.

Georgia has many challenges: Russia being one, Turkey, being another, the Karabakh conflict being third, these are all sort of on the edges of Georgia. Georgia has many internal challenges. And if you're talking about consolidating the integrity of the state and polity, it does make sense to focus on those internal challenges, specifically infrastructure, rural development, youth unemployment. There are probably a few more, but those are the first ones that come to my mind. These things are things that a Georgian government can actually address, and they are much more important frankly, to Georgia. And in fact, the more those internal problems are addressed, the more likely it is that there will be further integration with the EU and NATO.

*NS: How do you see the future of NATO? What about the leading European powers' stance on NATO and its grand goal of ensuring international peace and security, including the French president's iconic reference of it as "brain dead"? How optimistic – or pessimistic – are you about the future of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's performance in NATO? What are the implications for Georgia's security strategy?*

**NM:** With regard to the "NATO is brain dead" quote from Macron, he was trying to encourage Europe to take its own security more seriously, preferably, of course, under French leadership. If France concluded that NATO was brain dead, presumably they would leave the body. They haven't left, they're still very actively involved in NATO. This is just political rhetoric. But it does reflect a deeper concern shared by other European leaders about the ambiguities in the transatlantic relationship to begin with, given Mr. Trump, who

asked why they don't pay for their own security, et cetera? This is a good question. So, I think there was an effort to push along a European conversation about regional security, which was largely a consequence of Trump, but also a result of a changing strategic environment affecting Europe. So, what does Biden matter in this context? Biden will re-embrace transatlantic relations. There's no question about it. And the level of cooperation, which is already substantial, will grow. And I think that's probably a good thing.

Now, Mr. Erdogan, the *enfant terrible* of NATO, that is a real problem for NATO. It's a problem in terms of the Eastern Mediterranean, it's a problem in terms of Turkey's growing relationship with Russia, including a military assistance relationship and possibly some joint operational capability with Russian forces, which runs directly counter to NATO norms. There have also been tensions regarding Turkish policy in Syria. Turkey has had the largest land force capability for a European state for [quite some time]. And so this is a problem. But on the other hand, the major powers in NATO will not want to cut the cord with Turkey. And they will wait for Turkey to "see the light" and return to compliance. I don't see any reason to think that: a) we are going to be sufficiently irritated with the Turks to drop them from the Alliance; and b) I'm not sure, constitutionally, whether the allies could do that anyway. I mean, Turkey can leave the Alliance, but I'm not sure that the rest of the Alliance can eject Turkey. But nobody wants to go there anyway. Even the Turks don't want to go there. Not least because of historical rivalry with Russia. Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that, since nobody is immortal, there will eventually be a transition in Turkish politics.

*NS: As a follow-up question, this type of Turkey, which you described just now, is the only NATO member neighbor for Georgia. What should be the implications for Georgia's security strategy, how might it impact or have any kind of influence on it?*

**NM:** My first guess would be, probably not much effect. Turkey has a fairly sizable strategic interest in good relations with Georgia, not least as a transit country for energy supply. Maybe in the long-term that will become less important, but it is important for Turkey now, particularly in terms of the movement of natural gas and oil. These are the pipelines from Azerbaijan through Turkey, to Erzerum and Ceyhan. The other question is: why would the Turks decide to cause problems for Georgia? What's in it for them?

Taking Georgian foreign policy in the wider regional context, Georgia has good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Given the deep hostility between those two countries, it is a considerable success for Georgia to have retained stable and generally positive relations with both of them. Georgia also has stable relationships with Turkey, and, for that matter, with Iran. The big challenge for Georgian diplomacy is, as it always has been, Russia.

*NS: Let me finalize our interview with the question to which you partially started responding to earlier. Looking at the developments taking place in the EU's Eastern neighborhood – the persistent turbulence in Belarus and the victory of a pro-western presidential candidate in Moldova – should we expect that the EaP might move on to a new stage of enhanced cooperation with the EU?*

**NM:** Well, I'm not sure that that is the case. First of all, I think about the EU's foreign policy agenda.

The Eastern Partnership is one aspect, Africa is another, Asia is a third aspect, North America is a fourth. The EU has a very crowded foreign policy agenda, as well as a multifaceted and challenging internal situation. In other words, the European agenda is very crowded, and Europe's stakes are much higher in these areas than they are in the Eastern Partnership. If you look at the Eastern Partnership in budgetary terms and you compare it to the size of the EU budget as a whole, I assume we're talking about less than one percent of the total budget. So to the extent that we take budgetary investment as an indication of importance, this is very low on the pole and by the way, possibly a good thing for the Eastern Partnership states, because the more involved the EU gets these days, the more irritated the Russians become and the Russians have boots on the ground.

Take Belarus. If there is a political transition, I think that the EU would be very positive about it and would increase assistance. But if it increased technical assistance, monetary assistance, economic assistance, and political assistance, they would again have to be careful about the implications for the relationship with Russia

because Russia gets nervous when other people are walking around in his back garden. There would be a lot of scope for increased assistance. But the geopolitical effect of this is not clear to me. And Concerning Moldova, a place I have not studied closely, it has one great asset concerning the European Union and that is Romania as its kin state. The difference between those two and Georgia, is very simple. There are partnership states that are bordering the EU and partnership states that aren't bordering the EU. You [Georgia] fall into the second category. Consequently, it's not clear what influence the evolution of EU policy on, say, Belarus or Moldova would have on EU policy towards Georgia anyway. I personally think that the evolution of your relationship will be a long process. And the best thing that Georgians can do to push that along, going back to an earlier point, which is internal development, internal institution. If Georgia sorts out its own house, then its neighbors will be happy.

*NS: Professor Macfarlane, I'm really grateful for such an engaging conversation. Thank you very much for giving your time to us.*



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