

“SOFT ANNEXATION OF ABKHAZIA IS THE GREATEST LEGACY OF PUTIN TO HIS SUCCESSOR”

Interview with Thomas de Waal* Expert on Russia and Caucasus

Conducted by Alexander Jackson for CRIA

Question: What do you think is the next step in Abkhazia?

De Waal: One of the main problems in Abkhazia is the high degree of unpredictability on both the Russian and the Georgian sides. I don't believe that anyone wants a war over Abkhazia. However it's a very small territory, and there are a lot of armed men there from both sides. The Russians have recently deployed paratroopers there, ostensibly as peacekeepers, although they obviously have a big offensive capability. And the Georgians have deployed armed men in the only part of Abkhazia under their control, the Upper Kodori Valley.

The risk is that one side may try some kind of military action because they are afraid of the other side doing so; they'll launch what they believe is a pre-emptive strike. The territory is so small that a lot of it could be conquered in half a day, so a few hours of fighting could completely alter the situation. This would lead to the Russian peacekeepers inevitably being drawn in on the Abkhaz side, and we would have a Russian-Georgian war.

Question: Do you believe that the Georgian administration will be tempted to use military force?

De Waal: From what I gather, they have a number of options. [Georgian President] Saakashvili is quite indecisive and his mood changes a lot. So the military option is one that they are considering, although I think they have to be aware that it would be fairly suicidal - it would be the end of the international mediation effort in Abkhazia and the UN mission there. Although they would get support from some (mainly East European) countries, it would be pretty disastrous for Georgia. On the other side, I don't see any motives for the Russians or the Abkhaz to attack, unless they believed it was a pre-emptive strike.

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***Question:** What do you think that Russia will do next, regarding its ‘soft annexation’ of Abkhazia?*

De Waal: I think that Russia has, in its own terms, played this situation masterfully. They have used two events (Kosovo’s declaration of independence and promises of NATO membership to Georgia), as cover to claim that they are protecting Abkhazia. They are not recognizing Abkhazia, as the West did with Kosovo - this would leave Russia open to claims of hypocrisy, and would make Abkhazia more independent than it presently is. So I think that Russia has got more or less everything that it wants. This ‘soft annexation’ gives Russia de facto control over Abkhazia, it weakens Georgia and it annoys the West. I think this is possibly Vladimir Putin’s greatest legacy to his successor.

***Question:** Do you think that the Abkhaz themselves have a role to play? Will there come a point where they resent being under Russian influence?*

De Waal: I think this has basically happened already. The Abkhaz are in a rather unenviable position. They have de facto seceded from Georgia and proclaimed independence which no-one recognizes and which no-one will recognize. They are also very suspicious of Russia. Like most people in the Caucasus, they see Russia as having a colonial role which threatens their identity, and yet they’ve had no option but to embrace Russia. Russia has done many things for the Abkhaz – it has opened the border, it has paid pensions, it has provided investment. But the Abkhaz are being swallowed up, and there is no room for manoeuvre.

***Question:** To what extent is Georgia to blame for the situation in Abkhazia? Does President Saakashvili have a real plan for peace?*

De Waal: I think the Georgians do share a large portion of the blame. Saakashvili was elected in 2004 [after the ‘Rose Revolution’] with a huge popular mandate for change. He could have started again with a clean sheet, and put all the blame for what had happened in Abkhazia on his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze. There was still scope at that point to reach out to the Abkhaz and pull them away from Russia.

But Saakashvili and his administration have maintained the blockade and isolation of Abkhazia, and they’ve continued to talk about ethnic cleansing and have adopted a tone of moral outrage. They have developed a peace plan, but one on which they didn’t really consult with the Abkhaz - it’s a unilateral peace plan, and it looks to the Abkhaz like more of a public-relations statement to the West than a serious effort to engage.

There’s a lot of inconsistency in Georgia, there have been very positive gestures and steps from some people, and then some very belligerent statements from others. The Abkhaz don’t really know what to expect.

***Question:** Is there anything that the West can do in Abkhazia?*

De Waal: There are a number of things they could be doing. They are putting pressure on

the Georgians not to do anything stupid, which is having some results; they're also trying to put pressure on the Russians which, given the mood that Russia is currently in, is having fewer results. One thing they could do is to try opening some sort of presence in Abkhazia which would give the Abkhaz a window onto Europe, perhaps some kind of travel documents which would allow them travel to Europe or an EU office in Abkhazia - anything which would be seen as coming from neither Georgia nor Russia.

***Question:** Do you think that Armenia and Azerbaijan can draw any lessons from the situation in Abkhazia - does it reflect in any way on Karabakh?*

De Waal: I think the two conflicts run in parallel, and I think that the declaration of Kosovo's independence has had an effect on all the conflicts in the region. It means that the separatists - in Abkhazia, Karabakh or South Ossetia - have felt more confident that time is on their side and that history will recognise the realities on the ground. And it has meant that Georgia and Azerbaijan are more worried, and feel that time is working against them. There's a great sense of urgency, and both states have felt the need to work harder to reclaim these territories. Both countries have recently put resolutions to the UN General Assembly reaffirming their territorial integrity; they have felt compelled to do this because they felt that the Kosovo precedent was working against them.

***Question:** Do you think that with the new administration in Armenia we can expect to see any change in Karabakh?*

De Waal: No, I think the opposite. In Armenia there is an ongoing political crisis which saw blood on the streets in early March in Yerevan, with at least ten people killed. So the new president Serzh Sarkisian has now got his work cut out to prove his popular legitimacy in a very difficult situation and claim a mandate, which means that the last thing on his agenda at the moment is Karabakh. He had his first meeting with [Azerbaijani President] Ilham Aliyev in St. Petersburg on June 6th. They have agreed not to take any steps backwards, essentially an agreement that they will resume work on negotiations later this year.

***Question:** What long-term prospects do you see for Karabakh, and is there a chance that Azerbaijan's increasing oil wealth will lead it towards a military solution?*

De Waal: I think the prospects are quite gloomy at the moment. The Azeris are talking more and more about how any resolution of the Karabakh conflict must involve Armenian recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, which is obviously out of the question for Armenia. The most positive scenario is that after Aliyev is re-elected, he will have a new mandate and will want to think about doing a deal; but it's equally likely that he will use this new mandate to think about the military option, which I think would be a disaster. On the Armenian side, Sarkisian comes from Karabakh and is a veteran of the war with Azerbaijan. He is therefore in no hurry to make a big compromise which would be seen as betraying that victory. Both sides continue to believe that time is on their side, and both sides are half-right, and I think that's part of the problem.

Question: More generally, do you see any major changes in the Caucasus in the next year?

De Waal: I think this is a period when things are so delicate that a small event could spiral out of control. Take the Gali region of Abkhazia, the most southern region, which has a Georgian population of 40-50,000 who live there precariously - they are ethnic Georgians but live in Abkhazia, and don't have any real support from the Georgian government. Any armed incident there could escalate - large numbers of people could flee and there could be military interventions. Or look at the Karabakh ceasefire line which is almost 200 miles long and has only five unarmed monitors along it: on March 4th/5th we saw big violations of the ceasefire there.

Question: Do you think that those ceasefire violations were, as has been claimed, engineered by the Armenian defence ministry to draw attention away from the protests in Yerevan?

De Waal: Well, both sides blame the other for starting that particular incident for political reasons, but it may have just been accidental. In spring each side moves to higher ground to reclaim positions where the winter snows have thawed, and during this process an exchange of fire may have started which got out of control.

Question: Do you see any upcoming changes in the North Caucasus: in, for example, Dagestan and Ingushetia?

De Waal: There's a kind of permanent instability now both in Ingushetia and in Dagestan. This is something that President Medvedev may try and resolve, by putting a new leader in Ingushetia, for example. Chechnya is relatively more stable, the process of Chechenisation has more or less worked, by giving the Chechen leadership almost everything they asked for. This stores up problems for the future, but for now has brought much greater peace and stability to Chechnya. So I think that if Moscow could find leaders who they can do the same kind of bargain with in Ingushetia, that might be an answer. This might be something that Mr. Medvedev might be thinking about now that he's President.

Question: Do you think there will be any changes in Russian attitudes towards Georgia under the 'new' Russian administration?

De Waal: I don't think so, in the sense that even if Dmitry Medvedev wanted to have a thaw in relations with Georgia - and it's possible he does - Putin is still there as Prime Minister, and Putin was also extremely active in provoking Georgia in his last months in office, in a way that locked Medvedev into that policy. And even the foreign ministry, which is the most moderate of all the 'power ministries' in Russia, is locked now into that policy. I can't see that the Russians would withdraw their troops from Abkhazia, since that would look like backing down.

Question: Would a new American administration bring a new approach to the region?

De Waal: It obviously depends who wins. John McCain has been to Georgia several times,

he's even been to South Ossetia, and is rather confrontational with respect to Russia. It's difficult to say about Barack Obama, I doubt he knows much about Georgia, but I suspect it'd be more of the same. I do think that all of these conflicts in the South Caucasus could only be solved through some sort of 'grand bargain' between Russia and the United States, which would involve lots of bigger elements such as NATO membership, security guarantees, energy promises and so on. I think that's probably what's needed in order to defuse things; there's too much suspicion at the moment between Russia and the US over these issues.

***Question:** What are the chances of such a thaw in US-Russian relations?*

De Waal: Not good, particularly if McCain comes in, because he's quite hawkish on Russia. Also, it must be said, the Russians are in no mood to back down. For domestic purposes, picking a fight with the US that plays well with the electorate. It's an easy way to secure domestic popularity and to remind people that Russia is a great power.