

“GEORGIA COULD BECOME A NATO MEMBER, ONLY IF IT ACCEPTED RUSSIA'S TAKEOVER OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA”

Interview with Dr. Cory Welt*

Conducted by Sean Alexander for CRIA

Question: *Will Russia ever be able to live next door to a Saakashvili-run government in Georgia or one that is equally western-oriented?*

Welt: Well, the way things have been going, it looks like it will have to. The question is whether Georgia is fated to be Russia's Cuba, and unfortunately the signs point in that direction. Prior to the war, it looked like there might be a chance to put their relations on a new footing, but that has again been spoiled.

To flip your question around, we can ask whether Georgia will be able to survive as a western-oriented state living next door to Russia. Can it build a sustainable economy, can it orient itself more closely on Europe without a hasty road to NATO membership? With open Russian military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian security is diminished even if Russia has pulled its troops entirely out of the rest of Georgia. This looming threat, if it remains in place, will cast a shadow on Georgia's future development.

Question: *How does Russia reconcile its recent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with its steadfast refusal to accept independence for Kosovo?*

Welt: It's simple. The United States and the European countries that recognized Kosovo's independence insisted that it wasn't a precedent for other unrecognized states. Russia just turns that around and insists that the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is also not a precedent for other unrecognized states. (Incidentally, it's the same logic that allows Turkey to recognize Northern Cyprus but reject the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh). It was fairly clear that this could become a problem once the U.S. and others unilaterally recognized Kosovo's independence without United Nations sanction or Serbian consent. At least in the Kosovo case, however, there had been a genuine international effort to achieve resolution. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia had done all it could to block multilateral efforts at resolution prior to asserting the independence of these two regions.

Question: *Is there an economic benefit for either Georgia or Russia to have Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their camp, or is the issue simply a nationalist one?*

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Welt: There are some economic and strategic benefits, to be sure – the Abkhazian coastline makes up a good half of Georgia's Black Sea coast, while South Ossetia sits astride what would be the central north-south highway and is an enclave indistinguishable from the Georgian territory that surrounds it and extremely close to Tbilisi and the country's east-west artery to boot. Add to this the issue of internally displaced Georgians from Abkhazia that made up almost a majority of the population before the 1992-1993 war, and Georgia's firm belief that these regions are as "Georgian" as they are "Abkhazian" and "Ossetian," and you can easily understand the level of Georgia's commitment.

For Russia, Abkhazia is also of appeal both as a sizeable extension of Russia's own Black Sea coastline, for its real estate and tourism potential, and even as a source of construction materials and spillover accommodation for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. South Ossetia is of little value in and of itself, but it does provide a useful way to exercise military power to the south of the Caucasus mountain range and might also be a useful site for "shadow" economic activity tucked away from notice. Also, by supporting both regions, Russia has raised its stock among several of the peoples of the North Caucasus – both among the already staunchly loyal North Ossetians and the various Circassian/Kabardian ethnic kin of the Abkhaz in the west.

Finally, for Russia, it provides a continued hedge against Georgia's NATO membership. As long as there is a prospect of renewed conflict, it will be difficult for Georgia to secure membership, at least on the basis of the alliance commitments as they now are written. Georgia may get a NATO Membership Action Plan, either in December or later down the road, but there will be plenty of hesitation among NATO members to commit to Georgia's security as a full-fledged NATO ally. Hence, Russia has put Georgia in what it knows is, for now, an untenable situation – Georgia might be able to readily become a NATO member, but only if it peacefully and formally accepted Russia's takeover of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As long as it is not willing to do so, the question of NATO membership will continue to be delayed.

Question: What effect will the proposed US assistance package of \$1 billion have on stabilizing Georgia?

Welt: The package was important, first of all, as a signal of strong US support for Georgia, even if the US was not interested in defending Georgia militarily. That said, \$1 billion is a lot of money to serve only as a symbol. There's a lot of work to be done on thinking about the most effective use of the money, combined with the already significant aid flows that have been coming into Georgia in the last years.

Question: Could the US or EU have done more at the outset to prevent the crisis in South Ossetia, or at least to prevent its rapid escalation?

Welt: To take a longer view on the crisis, certainly the US and EU could have jointly decided to make it a priority to internationalize the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts, and to pressure and/or persuade Russia to go along with the transformation of the peacekeeping missions into international forces and even possibly to establish an international administration. But the will wasn't there to make this a priority, and there were doubts that such a plan would even succeed. That would have been the surest way to prevent a recurrence of conflict.

Ultimately, the US and EU were relying on Georgia to accept its weak military position vis-à-vis Russia, and for Russia to restrain from going overboard in its role as a revitalized regional power. There were limits to what Western countries were willing or able to make Russia do, and

though the US could tell Georgia (as it did) that if it were to fight Russia, it would fight it alone, Georgia's leadership could still convince itself that it might still be able to achieve its objectives or, at least, that it was better to try and defend its position than to watch its attrition as Russia consolidated control of both regions.

***Question:** President Medvedev recently reiterated Russia's intention to protect its sphere of influence. Is this likely to redraw the map in the Caucasus, or otherwise produce significant change in the region?*

Welt: It's a question of fulcrums, really. Georgia and Ukraine have been viewed as the possible tipping countries that could lead to a fundamental shift in the post-Soviet space, with Azerbaijan, Moldova, and conceivably even Armenia and Belarus joining Eastern "Europe." Outside Russia this has not really been seen as a zero-sum game, but Russia has perceived that such shifts would come mainly at its expense. Now we will see if such movement slows down or, conceivably, accelerates. The problem with interpreting the import of the conflict, of course, is that it is still difficult to determine what would have happened in its absence. The geopolitics of the entire region was uncertain.

***Question:** Switching to Turkey and Armenia, can their relationship truly improve without a resolution on the genocide issue?*

Welt: Yes. It has been a consistent point of Armenian state policy that Yerevan does not at all require genocide recognition in order to normalize relations with Turkey. For its part, though Turkey would like Armenia to publicly renounce territorial claims (a rather peculiar demand given that such claims do not formally exist), it would be hard-pressed to maintain this as the obstacle to normalization. The challenge really lies in the Karabakh conflict, and whether Turkey is prepared to normalize relations with Armenia given the status-quo. This will deeply alienate Azerbaijan, unless there is a context to this normalization that would make it in Azerbaijan's favor to at least tolerate normalization. Otherwise, Turkey will have to decide whether it can mollify Azerbaijan in other ways.