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--You are no stranger to the Southern Caucasus?

No. I started coming here in the mid-1990s shortly after joining the OSCE and have been coming here regularly since. I have been fortunate in that I have had an opportunity to meet people from all walks of life and observe the evolution of the region's three countries first hand. I also had an opportunity to compare how countries of the Southern Caucasus are progressing in relation to other post-Soviet States.

--What are your general observation about the level of democracy in the post-Soviet States?

It is difficult to make sweeping generalizations. One can look at changes of leadership as one of the measures. Many scholars of democratic transition believe in the so-called "two-turnover rule." I.e., for a country to be considered a democracy there need to be two successive peaceful changes of leadership through elections. Aside from the Baltic States, Moldova is the only post-Soviet country that has had two peaceful changes of leadership, first, in 1996, from Mircea Snegur to Mr. Luchinski, and more recently, to Mr. Voronin. A U.S. non-governmental organization Freedom House has a scale on which it rates various countries progress to democracy. According to the most recent Freedom House survey, the Baltic States are rated as "free", the three South Caucasus countries along with Moldova, Russia and Ukraine are found to be "partly free", and the rest, that is, the five Central Asian states and Belarus are rated "not free".

We can have a long discussion whether the cup is half-full or half-empty in the Southern Caucasus. On one hand, there have been disappointing elections, problems with the judiciary persist. The U.S. State Department's annual Human Rights Report, to take one source, contains a long litany of issues. On the other hand, freedom of assembly and association are generally respected. The media are more free than in the recent past. For example, think of Azerbaijan. There was censorship just a few years ago. Now you can see a lot of views represented in the Azeri newspapers. On the whole, there is of course room for improvement. And the three countries are yet to pass the "two-turnover test" that I just mentioned.

--What are the main differences between democratization in the former Soviet Union and in Central European countries such as Poland where you currently live?

I believe there are three main differences. First is the historical and geographical proximity to Europe. Think of Austro-Hungary, for example. Certainly Hungarians felt that they can enjoy at least as much freedom as the Austrians. Central European

countries have looked at Paris, Berlin or Vienna for cultural as well as political trends. Thus the Western European democratic evolution struck a chord among populations of Central Europe. Democracy and European values are simply something natural for them. Historically and geographically neither the Russian Empire nor the Soviet Union ever had the same degree of affinity to Europe as Central European states. Clearly some seventy years of a closed system in the USSR did not help to bring European ideas closer.

The second factor is what is seen by many people as the double illegitimacy of the Communist rule in Central Europe. The Communist rule was seen as illegitimate by the population not only because it was not elected by the people, but also because it was externally imposed. Thus it was much easier to shed the nostalgia for the old system and to move forward. In many post-Soviet countries the nostalgia for the past is much stronger than in countries of Central Europe.

Finally, the incentives have been different. Central European countries had prospects of fast-track NATO and EU membership. The first two factors I mentioned meant that it would not be as much of a challenge to them to join these structures as for the post-Soviet states. The incentives played an additional, but by no means decisive role in Central Europe's more rapid pace of democratization.

--What do you say to those who claim that economic prosperity should come before democracy or that only wealthy countries can afford to be democratic?

It is a good and fundamental question. There was a very serious study done on this issue not too long ago by Professor Adam Przeworski and his colleagues who were all at the time at University of Chicago. They found that the bonds of poverty are not inexorable. Some countries like Greece and Portugal were poor at the time they got rid of dictatorial systems. Malta experienced a period of growth while being a democracy throughout the whole period, but it started out as a poor country. India is the world's most populous democracy and is less wealthy than many countries that are something other than democracies. The study showed that dictatorships are not better than democracies in generating economic growth, and certainly working people are treated much worse in dictatorships. In short, there is no shred of support for the argument that poor countries need a "strong hand" to guide them to economic growth.

For those countries in Eurasia that have begun performing well economically in the recent years, due for example to a boost in oil and gas revenues, it is a question whether anything but a democracy can make this growth sustainable. There is a risk that this growth could fall victim to mistakes of a small group of decision-makers who may not have been freely or fairly elected by their people or who are not a subject to as much of media and public scrutiny as the politicians in democratic countries.

--Georgia, long thought to be Caucasus's most democratic country, and Kyrgyzstan, long thought to be Central Asia's most democratic country, now seem to be

teetering on the verge of major internal instability. This gives powerful arguments to democracy skeptics. Any comments?

I would prefer not to comment on situations in specific countries. But the trends you mention are worrying. I am not at all sure that democracy is necessarily to blame. Often it is the people's unfulfilled expectations associated with *partial and incomplete* democratic openings that are causes of instability and not the democratic openings per se.

--In your recent paper on Recommendation for Democratization Assistance in the Caspian region you appeared to be critical of some of the Western democracy assistance programs. How can Western assistance in this sphere be improved?

What I was critical of is imposing external agendas on the countries of the region and blind copying of programs from other parts of the world to the post-Soviet landscape. I do think that the Western assistance community could use more area studies specialists who have background in understanding what the Soviet system did to people, what values and what social contract existed in the societies and how people are likely to react to certain Western programs. I have seen some assistance programs launched that any qualified area specialist could predict were doomed to failure. Yet they were launched because they worked on another continent. Do not get me wrong, I do not think that the Western assistance community has done poorly, I simply believe there is room for improvement and more realism. I do think that more emphasis can be given to changing attitudes and not only to changing institutions such as laws and regulations. In this respect, I believe that media development and ensuring internet access are tremendously important. I also do think that something needs to be done about keeping ties between the countries of the region and those of their nationals who have left their home countries and are now in the West and their countries. These people are not only a potential source of remittances to their countries, but also of knowledge. They are potential "agents of modernization", so to speak. What they say about the West and about democracy is likely to be more far more convincing to their compatriots than whatever the Western democracy promoters say.

Final question, what is your view of the civil society in the Caucasus?

I believe that after a good start in the early 1990s the civil society in the Southern Caucasus became too insulated. There was a relative abundance of Western funding for all types of NGO activities, especially on various meetings bringing NGOs from the conflict zones together. Many NGOs became too insulated and simply focused on ensuring they keep receiving grants based on proposals that Western donors wanted to see rather than on meeting the needs of the population and on trying to establish a dialogue with authorities. Western donors should take a partial blame for this, but so should the NGOs themselves. Sometimes to tell a potential donor that it is focusing on a wrong issue and thus to risk losing a grant is an exceedingly difficult thing, but chasing grants also entails a risk, that of losing moral high ground and losing touch with the public. Despite the fact that a number of outstanding NGOs exist in the Caucasus, there

are unfortunately those organizations whose activities are conducted for the purpose of solely pleasing the donors. I do think time is ripe to take a retrospective look at the development of the civil society in Southern Caucasus and to draw some conclusions.

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