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Transcript

IN CONVERSATION WITH H.E. MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI, PRESIDENT OF GEORGIA

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President of Georgia

Transcript by Way With Words

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JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Jessica Matthews; I'm President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. It's a great pleasure to be here at Carnegie Europe and, particularly, as we host tonight Mr Saakashvili.

When he was first elected President of Georgia in January 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili was the youngest Head of State in Europe. He has presided over eight tumultuous years of history in which his country has seen wide-ranging reform, armed conflict and now competitive parliamentary elections which were watched closely around the world.

An effective crackdown on corruption and progressive legislation on the rights of minorities both deserve mention among the many changes that have taken place over the last few years. Here, in Brussels, Georgia has moved forward in its ambition to one day join NATO. It has made progress in visa liberalisation with the European Union, and has started negotiations on a deep and comprehensive free trade area as well.

It's not often that we congratulate someone for losing an election, but when the opposition Georgian Dream won last month's parliamentary elections, President Saakashvili and his party conceded defeat gracefully. That's not something that is very common in this part of the world, and we take note of it and give him full credit for it.

Mr Saakashvili remains president now, and must govern in tandem with Mr Ivanishvili, for the coming year, a very challenging task. We will be interested to learn how that partnership is developing, how Georgia's western friends can help the country in this period, and what lessons the president draws from his party's defeat in the October elections.

We have a special treat tonight, thanks to the Georgian delegation: Georgian wine for our reception. We thank you for that. We will enjoy it, I know. The president has agreed to leave plenty of time for Q&A, which we're looking forward to.

Mr President, we are honoured to have you at Carnegie Europe, and we look forward to hearing from you tonight. Please join me in welcoming the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili.

[Applause]

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: Thank you, Jessica. Thank you, first of all, for this gracious invitation. I am very pleased to be here. In the last two days we've had a meeting with the president of the European Parliament, the Secretary-General of NATO and the president of the European Union, but obviously it's also a nice treat to end with my visit here. It happens so that we were in town together with the Prime Minister; it was really a coincidence - my visit was planned one year before - but somehow it was a Georgian three days in Brussels.

It is a very interesting period and it is a very promising but at the same time dramatic period for our country. First of all, one has to say that Georgia has had very important benchmarks for the last eight years. We developed at a pace which is unheard in many parts of the world. For four out of the eight years, we enjoyed double-digit growth; we had 7% growth last year; we were expecting 8% growth this year. Poverty was decreased two and a half times.

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Overall, Georgia was ranked as Number Nine in the World Bank List of Doing Business Environment, which is top league; no other developing country has ever made it to Top Ten. Just to mention, for instance, Russia is 137th in that list, and many other post-Soviet countries are below 100. We were, according to a European Union study, the least corrupt country in Europe for the last year already. According, again, to the European Union's three-year study, we are the safest country in Europe, the least criminalised.

Now, this has the backdrop of where we were eight, nine, ten years ago, when we were one of the worst, one of the most criminalised, one of the most corrupt. Obviously, Georgia has shown examples of development, and the biggest question was: is it just some kind of... I think the biggest play [?] was: is it some kind of semi-authoritarian or authoritarian place where there might be modernising rulers, but in the end they won't give up power? Actually, these elections gave the answer to that question.

We handed over not only... although the transition was very smooth, because in the first few days we brought representatives of the new coalition to our ministry, to run those ministries de facto. We gave them total control of information and of our financial flows. We also gave them full access to all the files of the government on internal and foreign policy. We didn't have to hand over, under the present Constitution, the Ministry of Justice, Prosecution Office, Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Interior. We did give it to them because we thought that Government should have [unclear] and they're fully responsible for what they were supposed to do. Overall, this was a very smooth transition.

We believe that there is incentive to build on all this momentum. For the whole region, this was a powerful example. Vladimir Putin, to put it mildly, didn't like me or my government; on the one hand, he should have been rejoicing at what happened, but on the other, if you see the example of having free elections in that part of the world, it's a bad example for the region and also for the Russians, from his perspective.

Having said that, of course I cannot hide that I'm concerned by some of the developments already, after handing over power. We have cases – and Secretary-General of NATO said today and two days ago that he's extremely concerned by arrests of political opponents in Georgia. José Manuel Barroso spoke about selective justice, and the same was reiterated by Mr Van Rompuy.

A number of high-level arrests took place; the former Minister of the Interior, more than one person; the head of the Joint Chief of Staff; a number of other officials from military and police. A case was started against the Presidential Protection Service officials and the head of... and, basically, also some people against the Mayor's office of Tbilisi. There was a financial fraud case started against the Public Broadcaster of Georgia, and the announcement was made about that.

These are certainly matters of concern for us, but otherwise, with all these things, one thing should be made clear: Georgia cannot and will not go back to any other sphere of influence but Europe's. There is no constituency whatsoever in Georgia that will ever allow it to break away from that.

What we really need, despite all the shortcomings and despite all the setbacks, is to move forward, and we really need to get an Association Agreement with the EU. We should be ready to get an EU perspective for Georgia, and we should certainly get visa liberalisation, all the things which are in the pipeline. I think we are pretty able to do that.

The fact that if Europe doesn't accept Georgia, it will go somewhere else – well, it has no other place to go to. The only thing that is clearly important to understand is that we should... the situation in which we

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cannot go back, say, to the Russian domination sphere – be in position to go to Europe. That's what really matters now.

The other thing is that no matter who will try what, you cannot privatise Georgia's state institutions and you cannot hijack something that people are used to; that's vigorous free media, civil society and strong self-government. We just need to now get used to this new station where there is cohabitation, where there is some coordination, at different levels. Otherwise, if you go further than that, that some people will try to just kill all the freedoms because each has their own political system, it's not doable.

It would have been doable in Georgia ten years ago or 15 years ago. I think while something that the Rose Revolution made irreversible is exactly that, the people are used to these kinds of benefits. I think some other things can go wrong, but this cannot be reversed, the taste of people for freedom and the other taste people have got also, undeniably, for a successful government over the last eight years.

They know what the standard of success looks like already. It's not against the backdrop of chaos that a new government, or inefficiency, a failing government, that the new government has come in, where there will be need for authoritarians. No, everybody knows that Georgia had a successful government, including our opponents. Because of that, you cannot really reverse it. Putin came after Yeltsin, and people were longing for some kind of order, because Yeltsin's Russia was a mess. We had a Georgia that was very orderly and a fast-developing place and turned out to be a real democracy as well. That's something that we value a lot.

That's more or less what I have to say today, and, if there are questions you might get, I'm there to answer them.

JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS: Wonderful, thank you. I'm sure that there are a lot of questions. Tom de Waal?

THOMAS DE WAAL: Hello, Mr President. I'm Tom de Waal, I'm visiting from Washington. It's very good to see you. May I add congratulations to the graceful way that you've handled this period?

I want to ask you about the criminal justice system, and I think you're rightly concerned about issues of criminal justice. You yourself constructed a very punitive system of justice; Georgia now has the highest per capita prison population in Europe, very low acquittal rate in the courts.

Also, in 2004 there was also a wave of arrests, which had a huge popular support, which you did of members of the former regime, people like Gia Jokhtaberidze and Sulkhan Molashvili. It's very popular that they were arrested, but there was no due process observed in their arrests. I'm just wondering, first of all, do you regret constructing a system which now it's possible there are fears it could be turned against you?

Secondly, about these charges, like against Mr Akhalaya - he's charged with some very serious things, such as torturing prisoners and so on – what do you recommend as the best way to proceed in a controversial case like that? Thank you.

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: First of all, on the first question, there was a big, big difference: we were coming from Shevardnadze's government where they would get a letter every day or every other day from a state department: World Bank says, fire this minister, this minister, this minister – they are corrupt, they are stealing, they are basically a bunch of crooks.

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We had the government that was the least corrupt in Europe, according to every estimate. Our budget grew for the last ten years, and these are real figures. Tax has gone down 60%, the budget grew 11 times. That's exactly the index of legalisation of economy and crackdown on corruption. These are figures; these are not my words against somebody else's assessment; these are real things.

From that point of view, going after... even now nobody says, when we have these charges now, that eventually we'll start to say, oh, there's some corruption, but in 2003 consecutive Gallup Polls that were done by NDIR [?], a variety [?] of people, indicated 98% of Georgians said they had encountered corruption firsthand. The last five years, it's 0.1%. By the way, I was also pissed off by the 0.1%; I asked who they are, and they turned out to be medical doctors. I'm saying that because it's an entirely different context; people who were arrested in 2004, people knew they were corrupt.

By the way, they proved themselves corrupt; you mentioned people... the head of the Railway Department was released within a week because he paid back \$9 million cash to the budget. Then Shevardnadze's son-in-law not only was released but he paid \$14 million of tax arrears, which was enough to pay back pensions for several months; the old population's pensions were miniscule.

This guy, by the way, now is the second-richest man in Georgia, after Ivanishvili. He continues his business; it quadrupled in price in my government. He still is a very successful businessman in Georgia. He never liked us, he still doesn't like us, but he made business in Georgia, under my government. That really tells you why Georgia was successful and why it was easy to do business.

Regarding the charges they have brought now, the charges have nothing to do with torture. What I heard from television, from what they announced, there were charges related to something that happened one or two years ago related to verbal or insults against soldiers, etc, but there is no element, as far as I know, here... At this stage, I have not heard about those charges, and they are not official.

What I'm saying is that you can argue about things, but everything has the due process of law, everything needs a procedure. If you arrest somebody in the way they were arrested – six in the morning, summoned to the Office of the Ministry of Defence, taken to a back room, told that he was there to meet people from Afghanistan, and, basically, handcuffed and led out – I'm talking about the head of Joint Chief of Staff, actually Acting-General - for something one year before that, that was read on television, that's where I heard it: he pulled an ear off a soldier and verbally assaulted him. To put it mildly, it doesn't look very... It poses lots of questions, what this is all about.

It doesn't stop there; now cases are all around the place. We have a case against the mayor's office, we have a case against my Personal Protection Office, we have cases against a number of Ministry officials, and, frankly, I think it's a very unvelvet [sic] continuation of what was a very velvet transition.

Again, as I said, it goes against the backdrop of what the Georgian government was. The Georgian government was an extremely efficient government and everybody is convinced, till the very last day, until elections, government had 60% to 70% approval from the population, that's a fact of life. Obviously, then somebody else came in and he promised lots of good things, from a popular point of view, like free cultivation of land, people don't have to pay back bank credits, half-price for electricity and gas, decreasing gasoline prices dramatically. People, obviously, have expectations of this sort right now, which, we all know, are very difficult to fulfil.

We have, obviously, a prime minister who promised to pay for it from his own pocket, if the Treasury money is not enough. We had a serious tax surplus which we left to them, a couple of billions, but, frankly, I don't think it's enough for any of these promises.

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There will be questions asked, there will be developments for the next several months, and I think people should get real, not to focus on those issues, rather to refocus them on something that I don't think is [?] a substitute for free gasoline or free cultivation of land. That's my impression. That's why we need to work on those issues, and we need to get to the business of the government.

From my perspective, I'm not there to impede the government from doing things, I showed it, from all points of view; I want them to, and I think the parliamentary minority needs them. We have very good, from my standpoint, potential in parliament to really become a debating and important place.

I don't think anybody has now the stomach for really impeding the government or creating artificial obstacles for them. We want them to move on, to get into political process, and these kinds of things should be solved within political process. It should not be like, okay, well, I don't like you, and I send you to the Prosecutor's office, or something – no, it should be a political process that should take care of this kind of stuff. I think eventually we'll get back to this, hopefully, because that's the only normal way to govern a country.

I'm there, I said many times, to help this government. I don't want to use the one year of my presidency that's remaining for undermining them; I don't think it would be appreciated by anybody, and it's not my call either.

On the other hand, it's very important to leave in place a vigorous system of checks and balances. I've heard things like: why is this old government still around? Why is the president still around? Why do we have to go through this lengthy process of parliament...? These are things they have to learn, that governing is a very lengthy procedure and all these things go through some slow [or legal?] process.

By the way, I think even... you mentioned law enforcement and things – unfortunately, many people were fired from there, many people left on their own. We saw some old people who were fired before brought back. All of that's also an interesting experiment to watch, but one thing I can tell you, this is no longer the law enforcement system I left, in terms of people. It's the same in terms of buildings, they are wonderful – in terms of people, there is a dramatic change there. Facilities, tech equipment, all these things are still there, but, hopefully, we can keep the spirit of progress and transparency and efficiency. Of course, rule of law is very important.

JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS: Who would like to go next? Yes, please...

UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: Mr President, the poet Dryden said of a celebrated English politician of the 17th century: sagacious, cautious [sic], turbulent of wit, a man fit to rule or ruin the state. Some of your opponents said that sort of thing about you before the last election yet they're all very surprised at the graceful way in which you ceded power. I am an Irishman and one of the high points of Irish history, in 1932, was when the party which had won the Civil War ceded power to the party that lost the Civil War following an election. I believe that the most important test of a democracy is a transition. You deserve to be congratulated most sincerely for that.

The first question I would put to you, and the only question, is, seeing what you have done and your ability to give way and be democratic and constitutional, you are a young and able person and I believe that under the Constitution of Georgia, insofar as I know it, you could have and should have a future – have you any further political intentions? Presumably, your path is set until the end of your presidency, but after that, in a democratic system, it is always possible to lead an opposition and, if necessary, to lead a comeback on another transition.

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PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI: Thank you. First of all, on the first suggestion, I think Georgia is still not... for Georgia to have its credentials irreversible as a real democracy, we need – just one free election is not enough – we need another change of government through another free election, or partial change. I'm not saying... it can be through self-government, it can be through presidency, it can be through... but we need partial change.

The chance we got after this election is that before we always had a system when, if a party controlled everything, one branch of a party controlled everything – it's gone. That's why Georgia has a real chance to become a real democracy now. By the way, that's a chance for judges to become stronger, because their own institutions safeguard the democracy there; so the independence of judges, they just need to take that and use that properly.

It's important that once we get, whenever it happens, partial or full change of the government one more time, then I can say, yes, that what we achieved now is important. You rightly said, we are blamed of being authoritarian, this, that and everything; it doesn't work this way, because we didn't want it to work this way. We wanted to be... I think we couldn't have built some kind of...

When we are talking about a liberal economic model, I was always talking about Singapore. I think I was right, because we're at number nine now, Singapore is Number One on that list of doing business, making things easy. However, I always said we cannot be Singapore politically because people have to go through their... and even Singapore cannot be Singapore in the 21st century, and that's something else, but especially in our country - we are a European nation, and people have to go through their learning experiences, through their own intuitions, through their own ups and downs, and understand what their future should be.

From that point of view, it's a very structured process, because I think for the next couple of years, because it's such a sharp change from what we represent to what it is now - I'm not saying it in a negative or positive way, but it is a sharp change - then we'll get rid of lots of illusions, we'll get rid of lots of adverse things that affected and slowed down many reforms in our society, and will out centred [?] from this.

Now, with regard to my future, for me, this one-year thing is an interesting experience, because I was used to going around and they were opening new buildings, new highways, new everything; that's no longer the prerogative of this kind of presidency. I think we are a party of many leaders; we have lots of interesting people, lots of young people in our parliament, amazingly smart, educated and combative. I myself was impressed by some of our new figures we had there, a lot... I keep being impressed every day.

We built this parliament building, which they want to move parliament away from, but we don't have words for that, which itself is so well done that... it's a psychological thing, but it makes it difficult not to be civilised there. Even the interaction between different factions is so limited that fistfights are not something... everyone expects to have fistfights but there is no room for fistfights there, everybody just does their own thing. These kinds of things make a small but important difference.

These people will grow up, these people will be... and we are very much a collective group; it has never been a one-man show in my government, and it will certainly not be, in the future, one-man politics in the party. That's all I can say about that – it's wide open for everybody else as well, so we'll see whatever the next...

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JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS: I'm used to thinking that things could not get worse than the United States Congress, but, clearly, it has a way to go as well. Who would like to go next? Yes, sir, please...

JAN BALLIAUW: I'm Jan Balliauw from Belgian Television, VRT. You said: it's a coincidence that I'm in Brussels while the Prime Minister is also here. Is there no coordination –who's running Foreign Policy in Georgia, [overtalking]?

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: We would like to have more of it, let's put it this way.

JAN BALLIAUW: This is not bad, the image of...?

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: Because our ambassador also was informed from other sources rather than...

JAN BALLIAUW: Is it not bad for the image of Georgia, that you two are meeting the same persons?

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: You should understand it's really a quite sharp transition; it was moved from our side, but it's sharp in terms of experiences, people. I cannot say that I'm rejoicing in this fact. I was invited one month earlier together with... we have also a private parliamentary assembly, so it's a combination of two visits. Obviously, once the Prime Minister got into office, he got his invitation from the same institutions.

I guess we will have to coordinate and, also, those institutions will have to coordinate. In any case, I'm happy they are here. They were here because it's also a very much educational process for them; they get lots of new information. It's one thing to interact with hired lobbyists that can sell you just any picture; the other thing is when you come and see real people, real institutions, real leaders and discuss real issues with them.

From that point of view, I was not pleased by the level of criticism they got, which was pretty high. For a first visit, it was not something that... I'm not pleased because I didn't want Georgia to advance; it's obvious. The more we advance in this direction, the safer the democracy will be anyway, so, from us, it's not just an altruistic thing. I believe that it's a very useful process for everybody.

MATT ROJANSKY: Hi, it's Matt Rojansky, also visiting from Carnegie in Washington DC. As I understood it, a significant part of the reason that a number of Georgians didn't support United National Movement on election day was their feeling that relations with Moscow, obviously a very important neighbour, could have been handled differently and ought to have been handled better and that that was being promised by your opponent.

I know you're not at the end of your term yet, but if you look retrospectively at your own handling of that relationship, I would ask, first, do you feel that Georgia is in a better and more secure position today than where you found it, or not? Do you have any significant regrets in that respect? Then I'd ask you to look forward: what would you tell Mr Ivanishvili on that account, what needs to be done?

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: First of all, it's not so clear-cut that it was this kind of factor, because when you look at the polls, when Georgians are asked: do you want better relations with Russia, everybody would say yes. If you break down this question and ask: do you want better relations at the expense of ceding them their territories, people would say, absolutely not. Do you want better relations in exchange – and this is most important – for giving up NATO and EU, the overwhelming majority say no. Do you want better relations in exchange for giving up our democracy and basic principles - I'm quoting

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these, NDIR [?], different polls – they say no. When you go to the essence of the matter, then it becomes much more difficult.

I think the new government is discovering exactly the same thing as we discovered at the beginning of our terms. We came with a tremendous amount of goodwill towards Russia. I believed that Shevardnadze mishandled this relationship; I profoundly thought that at that moment when I came in, that this was also partly inefficiency on his side. Then we thought we are a young government full of... we speak better Russian than even Shevardnadze, some of us were almost native Russian speakers; we know that culture, we go there, we just... we're a small country, with small interests; they have big interests; maybe we can accommodate each other and find some common way.

That was my... My first meetings with Putin came with this impression that, yes, with this man, yes, we have different backgrounds, but he can maybe... I was not exactly like George Bush, but I had the feeling that you can do some things. Things got more and more complicated for us [?], because they asked for very concrete unacceptable things, like having their candidate as Minister of Security - we abolished that ministry altogether – or do [or dual?] an anti-terrorist centre which would be basically directly undermining our security, undermining... Then, of course, NATO and then, of course, EU, and then all these issues...

From that point of view, we are seeing very much the same process in the first two weeks, but much faster than it ever went with us. It's very much déjà vu for me. If good it's fast, because then they will discover quickly what took us some time, maybe a couple of years, to really discover. Of course, these are different circumstances - it was after war, and all this stuff - and, from that point of view, it's maybe... it's now, on the one hand, easier to discover this and more complicated to fix. We'll see.

One thing I can tell you, there is no way that anybody in Georgian society would want to turn back and give up the European and NATO's [inaudible]. No, I don't see it; I don't see a new generation ever doing it, and the older ones, also; I think they have full consensus. There are countries in the Eastern Partnership where there is no national consensus on those issues, basically in none of them, except Georgia. In all of them, there are either regional divisions or deep internal society divisions over these issues. In Georgia, with all the divisions we have on all other issues, there is no division on this core thing.

Of course, part of the reward or... in terms of when it came to turbulence in the electoral map in Georgia, came as a result of people who were anti-modernisation and it implied they were also anti-European or anti-western, but they were still a marginal group. They exist, but even they are not in any way pro-Russian; that's something else. They don't accept modernisation per se on many accounts.

There are big movements, like on religious issues, intercommunity relations issues, even the buildings issues: architectural issues; it really became a big part of... we build lots of nice modern architecture and lots of people reject it. They didn't like it and they are threatening to demolish it. The present government continues to speak about demolition since they were... even after elections.

I accept I thought it was pre-election rhetoric – not unusual - but, okay, when you are already in government, talking about demolition, I don't think it's terribly popular; but that's what they keep saying. Again, this is anti-modernisation, but this is not pro-other countries, in any way.

LAURENCE NORMAN: Hi, Mr President. Laurence Norman from the Wall Street Journal. A couple of questions, if I may; just zooming away from Georgia itself- given the election results that you faced, given the results in the Ukraine recently, given the push from Moscow for a Eurasia Union, if you look at the

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Eastern Neighbourhood there's a sense here of expanding Russian influence: is that the way you see it, and what would you like Brussels to do about it, if that is the case?

Just a second question on Georgia itself: what is your prescription now, with one year left in office, for resolving the territorial issues with Russia? What are you going to do in your last 12 months there to try and leave office with that resolved?

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI: Do you mean with Russia?

LAURENCE NORMAN: Yes.

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI: First of all, I think it's oversimplification to say that there is this encroachment upon those countries from Russia. Obviously, Russian policy is crystal clear: they want to use energy leverage and other leverages to do it. It's true that, also, in Georgian elections, Russian money played maybe a decisive factor, it's true.

On the other hand, also, it's not so easy with what's happening for Russia itself; first of all, if you look at the Customs Union, the Customs Union is specifically structured for economic ties that Russia has with two countries, Kazakhstan and Belarus. However, if you move to the Ukraine, then, from a Ukrainian standpoint, it's not profitable to be in the Customs Union, it's as simple as that. There's a specific issue with Belarussian refiners, etc, which makes sense for Belarussians; not the case with the Ukrainians.

Now, in the long run, Russian domination should be based on either military domination or mostly economic, energy domination. Military, 21st century, despite what happened to us, is more and more questionable, in this context. On energy issues, the biggest game-changer is Shell Gas. Shell Gas really turns things upside down. With Shell Gas, the first thing that happened is that the main hope for expansion for Russia, the Shtokman Source, is basically out. They were planning to sell it to North America and to finance expansion, including also the doubling of the military budget.

What happened is that now America will already this year become an exporter of gas to Asia, to Korea, and by 2016 it will be the biggest energy exporter, the United States, of the world, bigger than all the other exporters there. That's what the assumption is. While Brazil now has oil, and more and more of this, and, generally, North America will become self-sustaining [?] [inaudible], but Qatar started with a European market...

By the way, there was an agreement also to allow Qataris to take their energy straight to Ukraine, but Ukraine, by 2015 or 2016, will have tremendous Shell Gas resources already coming out. Basically, within the next several years, they will become fully energy sustainable and also sell energy to Europe.

Now, I've heard Francois Hollande talking to an ecologists' movement in France to make exploration of Shell Gas in France. If it happens, France becomes the biggest gas producer in Europe. Now Romania's exporting Shell Gas; Bulgaria had some fears because of ecologists, but now they're talking to them, they're considering this. What it all tells you is that there no longer energy domination, there is no longer... what's the only economic attraction today of Russia, unless they modernise? This, energy; and it will be gone very soon.

Clearly, it's a big headache for today's Russian leaders, but it reshapes the whole thing with how the rest of the region will view Russia and how Russia will view itself as an individual. From that perspective, I think modernisation is the only key from that. Because of that, Georgia provides a very powerful example. Medvedev had to say twice during one parliamentary week in Russia that... first he said, oh,

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Georgia's reforms are great, but Georgia's too small and insignificant; we are the Great Russia, we cannot do that. The second time, he said, yes, I absolutely hate Saakashvili, but the things that he did in Georgia, we should start to apply them in Russia.

Now, of course, the Saakashvili government is gone, there is theoretical knowledge of what happened in Georgia, but I think, hopefully, some of the good things will continue. On the other hand, the example of it being changed through the elections is also quite confusing for them. From that point of view, what can be done? I think, really, the best way for Georgia is to stay on course towards Europe, towards NATO, and towards economic development, and then we will be in totally different negotiating positions with the Russians. That's how I see it.

We don't need to rush there. The only thing we need to keep is to engage people in occupied territory, where it's left, to provide examples of what Georgia will have to offer to them eventually. I see no other aspect; I don't see any prospects in the near future for major breakthrough in that direction.

JAN TECHAU: Thank you. Mr President, you had a conversation today, you said, with the NATO Secretary-General. The issue of Georgian membership, which was considered dead until fairly recently has seen a revival within NATO, it's being discussed again informally, but we also know that there's very strong opposition in parts of Europe about NATO membership of your country. How do you want to convince the sceptical Europeans about the advantages of Georgian membership?

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: Until recently, the good news was that, ultimately, it boiled down to two things; first, that Georgia should hold elections, and we passed that test; and, second, it was that Georgia is not defendable. That's a geopolitical argument which is not sustainable, because we had other examples, not least West Berlin, where it was questioned.

We are not talking about membership, we are talking about something very close to membership, and it's moving on; and, of course, eventually we are talking about membership. That's the thing that we had to build on, on elections. In 2000... I was approaching every summit of NATO with great fear, because every time, if there was no progress or even some... they would register regress, it would be a disaster.

While Chicago was, in that respect, very big positive news for us, because Georgia was in more forums [?] than any other Allied country; non-Allied country, we were mentioned as strongest candidate for the next round of enlargement, 2014. That's why these elections provided a chance to build on the momentum, that's why we now... I was trying to explain to the new government that we should not just deny that Georgia had achievements but build on those achievements and say they'll do more.

That's why we need to keep this political system now active. We need to avoid excesses, like I was mentioning, in order to put us back on track. Unfortunately, a military committee visit that was coming to Georgia was postponed, hopefully for not too long. We'll have a NEC meeting with Georgian ministers here in a couple of weeks' time or even sooner, and we'll have, hopefully, ministerial in December where there can be some kind of positive signal sent, provided that we ourselves don't spoil things too much back home. That's how I see it. If we put it back on track, then there is a possibility of further progress.

JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS: We have time for one or two more. Go right ahead.

ANNA JOBA: Anna Joba. I would like, President, for you to clear one mystery for me, and I'm sorry if it's maybe quite a trivial problem, but I'm just a [unclear] cabinet of Commissioner Fila [?]. I would like to clear the fact: how do you envisage the changes to the constitution that are being or will be implemented,

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because there is now this confusion about when they should be implemented and, actually, how the State will be functioning, having implemented these changes? Thank you.

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: First of all, most of the de facto has already been implemented, as I said, because I handed over more power than I needed to because we needed a functioning government; so de facto is there. If the National Movement had won the election, that wouldn't have been the case, but because there was this cohabitation thing, I thought it appropriate that the government should be independent, as much as they could, for the presidents.

Otherwise, when it's implemented, it's a good system, because you have oversight from president, but you have a functioning government that is totally autonomous. That's what we needed; we needed these kinds of checks and balances.

What I hear now, that some people want the parliamentary majority to scrap the position of president and to move the election to parliament, is not a good idea, it will not be supported by the people. It's basically taking away something that they think belongs to them, and in this type of situation, it's not going to work.

Otherwise, I think once the Constitution is enforced, either from October next year, I think it will be pretty well functioning. It got very high praise from the Venice Commission when we implemented it, when we introduced it. They said that it's a constitution with full European spirit.

We really need now to get to the moment where, if they want to change something else, they first have to go to the Venice Commission. That's a long process; we should not even allow the idea of having changes within like one month, two months; that was the floating idea there, but they don't have votes for that. Some of our MPs were coming under huge pressure, but it's not going to work.

JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS: Mr President, you've lived up to your reputation for candour, and we really appreciate it, and want to say what an honour it's been to host you here at Carnegie Europe and to wish you the very best.

PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI: For me, the same thing – thank you.

[Applause]