Interview with Francis Fukuyama: "We Need to Reanimate Some of that Spirit of Freedom"

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American philosopher and political scientist, Professor, by courtesy, of Political Science at Stanford University – Francis Fukuyama is sure that the liberal democracy is the best form of government. In a recent interview with the RFE/RL Georgian Service he noted: "I think that the idea of the End of History really annoys people that were products of that Soviet system because it basically tells them that they have no future". Fukuyama considers that it's people themselves have to protect democracy "and one of the advantages of democracy is that you can correct mistakes and you can rectify institutions when they are challenged". Professor Fukuyama shares his views on the circumstances that Ukraine's NATO membership in a foreseeable future may become a reality, even a necessity. RFE/RL's Nino Gelashvili talked with Francis Fukuyama in Tbilisi where the 6th "Leadership Academy for Development", joint training program of Stanford University together with Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) was taking place.

Nino Gelashvili: Recently, listening to quite a few US speakers, being those former members of administration or analysts, etc. it sounds quite depressive and not helpful at all to hear about the challenges of the US democracy, even crisis is named. And it's not helpful for the people who served this very idea of liberal democracy for their whole life or who follow now, I mean young people. But it's quite helpful for those who for the sake of keeping themselves in power try to use this as an argument that "you see, there is a crisis", "even in the West liberal democracy doesn't work" and "there is nothing good liberal democracy could bring to the people". And it's the case in Georgia too. As they try to make some kind of scary things and you quoted one of the phrasesof them – "if you vote for liberals they will come and turn your sons into daughters and daughters into sons". In Georgia most often it sounds like "mother is the mother and father is the father".

My question is how would you name or describe the current state of democracy in the US and globally and what kind of transformation do you think the US is facing right now?

Francis Fukuyama: I think we are experiencing a real problem in American democracy because we have a former president that tried to cling to power. He wasn't willing to turn power over to a legitimate successor. And I think what's very worrisome is the fact that so many Americans are still willing to vote for him even though he did that. It doesn't mean that American democracy is over. I think it's a challenge. We've experienced many challenges in the past and one of the advantages of democracy is that you can correct mistakes and you can rectify institutions when they are challenged. But there's no question that it's going to be a very important election that we're facing in November, because it will affect not just the domestic order in the U.S., but also

the international order as well, given how fused domestic and foreign policy have become at this present moment.

Nino Gelashvili: You mentioned Donald Trump. They say that if he becomes president, it will not be like his first term, that It will be much worse and according to what I've heard from many people in terms of threatening institutions also. But my point is, one thing is what he says during this campaign and what he threatens with quite a few people, but another thing is what will he be pursuing when and if he is a president. So, what would be your comment on that? What is your expectation? Is it is it true that the whole system, whole democracy, the whole country institutions will not be resilient enough not to balance one person's possible, potential wrong decisions?

Francis Fukuyama: Well, I think that it's not going to be simply one person, because one of the things that he's been doing is recruiting a lot of people who are loyalists that he would like to put in positions of power. That's going to be a big struggle because I think that the civil service and the bureaucracy are going to resist that. The court system in the United States has, actually, been quite strong, partly because judges are at a federal level appointed for life and it's very hard to remove them. And therefore, although he has appointed certain judges that are, you know, more loyal to him, that's a relatively small number. And that's why I think the legal system has been probably the most important check on presidential power. But I think the reason that I and others expect that a second term is going to be different is because in the first term he really didn't have any associates or, you know, lieutenants that could carry out his policies. And I think they've recognized that this was a weakness and they're going to try to rectify that by you know recruiting many, many more loyalists into the government. But we don't know whether that's going to succeed or not.

Nino Gelashvili: How would it impact the foreign policy agenda? What could be the scale of change?

Francis Fukuyama: Well, it could be very dramatic. You know, he said at a rally about a month ago that basically these members of NATO hadn't paid their dues, as he calls them. It's kind of ridiculous because there are no dues at NATO, but he calls them. He basically told Russia that they should go ahead and attack a NATO member that hadn't paid its dues. He's told other people...

Nino Gelashvili: Then he made some corrections later.

Francis Fukuyama: Yeah, but he has definitely told people privately that he wanted to pull out of NATO. He may not be able to do that legally, but the deterrent effect of NATO really depends on NATO's enemies believing that they will act together decisively as an alliance. And if the president doesn't want to actually enforce the Article 5 commitment, then it weakens that sense of deterrence. So that's, I think, a danger that we face.

Nino Gelashvili: I know you are very often asked a question about the End of History concept. And I know the explanation and the essence of it. You also said in your recent interview with the Dojt TV that "we have to keep liberal democracy in mind as the long-term goal for all of our political actions and not lose this sight of the desirability of liberal democracy as the kind of society we want to live in". But how that could be helped in the Western societies and in the societies like Georgia where we have never reached real democratic governance, I mean, developed democracy? How that could be helped by the partners or by Georgian citizens themselves?

Francis Fukuyama: I really think that it's Georgian citizens themselves that are the ones that have to protect democracy in Georgia. When the government tried to pass the NGO law, this Russian-style NGO law, a little more than a year ago, Georgian civil society erupted, and there were huge demonstrations, and the government had to back down. And I think that's the kind of political action that is needed to really defend democratic institutions. I think that winning elections is still pretty important. I think that Poland did a very good job last year in having its liberal opposition parties cooperate with one another so that they could win an election and put their leader in charge of the government in place of the Law and Justice Party. So, these are all things that require organization, mobilization.

You have to convince people to come out and protest and vote and things of that sort, but that's the way that you get power in a liberal democracy and I think that's the advantage of a liberal democracy.

Nino Gelashvili: When you say "winning"[the elections] you mean the opposition or the idea of transformation and going ahead? What do you mean exactly?

Francis Fukuyama: Well, you know, all of those things are necessary. People aren't going to come to vote unless they have a good reason to vote. And I think you need to explain to them how important not just particular policies, but holding on to their democratic system and their freedoms is. That's the spirit, I think, that motivated people back in 1989 and in 1991 when they came out in the streets in a big way all across the former communist world. And I think, you

know, we need to reanimate some of that spirit of freedom. And that's really the job of leaders and the people that inspire democrats to act.

Nino Gelashvili: And still, the environment, I mean internally and globally, is very complicated and challenging of these parliamentary elections in Georgia and we still have this very campaign after the so-called Russian Law failed. And now they [authorities] have this initiative on constitutional amendments against LGBTQ propaganda and this is used as an instrument against civil society, independent NGOs and also against those who finance them - partners of Georgia and Western funds. The criticism from the ruling party is endless and boundless towards them. So, in this situation what could be a counter force, counter argument for the Georgian society? I don't know what part of the society is I mean strong in its beliefs in democracy. Well, we know the support level [of the society] towards the European integration and towards the integration into NATO, but I'm not sure about the quality of this belief in democracy.

Francis Fukuyama: Well, I think, there have to be arguments made at different levels. You need to remind people how important it is to have institutions that preserve their freedom. You need to remind them about how terrible it is to live in countries that don't have freedom, like Russia. What's happening to ordinary people is they're mobilized and dragged into a war that they don't really want. They have to be reminded about the actual impact of authoritarian government, the way it leads to war and to aggression. I think, that's one of the powerful arguments in favor of liberal democracy is that because it requires a consent of the people, you know, they don't get into the kinds of conflicts that authoritarian states do. So, all of those are part of the arguments, the counter arguments that need to be made.

The other, you know, thing is that people need to understand there's a hierarchy of freedoms. One of the things that the enemies of democracy have been trying to pretend is that, for example, LGBTQ rights are the most important rights of all. And I think they are important. They need to be protected. But, you know, there are even more basic rights like freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom to vote. and those are not observed in authoritarian countries, not in Belarus, not in Russia, not in China. And that is a message that needs to be hammered home repeatedly.

Nino Gelashvili: The freedoms you've just listed, were were attacked and suppressed in Russia by Vladimir Putin many years ago. And actually, the West had more than enough lessons and signs or proofs from Putin's regime not to see where he was heading to and taking his country to. But still (and for Georgians it was very painful, especially because it happened after the war of 2008) the West offered Russia this very famous, well-known now Reset Button, and let also Russia to be that integrated into Europe's energy market, etc. And the thing that enemy of freedom and democracy in his own state and in neighboring states can never be a reliable

partner internationally, globally, was clear. And I don't think there are so many fools in the West that they didn't know that. And also Russian opposition, including Vladimir Karamurza, who is in prison now and was saying also in one of his interviews six years ago that one should not expect anything good from an authoritarian leader. Do you think, professor, that the things are called their names adequately now, at least now?

Francis Fukuyama: Well I think that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine really woke a lot of people up to the nature of the challenge that we're facing. I think they're not fully awake because I think there's a high level of investment in military readiness that needs to be made. It needs to be made both to support Ukraine in the current war, but it also needs to be made to prepare to deter and if necessary, to fight a future war. Because I think that Putin has made it pretty clear that he's not going to stop. Even if he manages to defeat Ukraine, that's not going to be the end of it, that he really wants to reassemble the old Soviet Union. And so there'll be pressure against Georgia, there'll be pressure against Moldova, there could be pressure against the Baltic states. All of these are countries that I think are very much at risk. And right now, they don't have the sufficient industrial base and they don't have the active military forces to really defend themselves. So, I think it's very critical this realization that we're in a very different period where geopolitics and large-scale conflict are realities. This is something that needs to be understood by politicians, and they have to be willing to make the difficult trade-offs in order to prepare for that kind of world.

Nino Gelashvili: Many people may think that it's not time now to analyze and take much time to learning lessons of the past, being it close or the older ones, but still, are the lessons learnt I mean learnt enough about Russia, about the threat it creates? Why I'm asking that because despite we see that stated anonymous support towards Ukraine, we have a reality today that Ukraine, while continuing courageous fight against Russian aggression, is in a shortage of ammunition and weaponry and asking desperately for that. How brave, do you think, or how clear should or could the West be today? Do you find it enough or do you think there is more possible?

Francis Fukuyama: Of course, there's always more that's necessary and possible. But we should just be frank about where the real problem is. The real problem is in the US Congress and in the Republican Party that has basically switched sides in this conflict, where there's a lot of sympathy for authoritarian government, for strongmen, and frankly for Putin himself on the part of the American right. It used to be that it was mostly people on the extreme left that were sympathetic to the Soviet Union, but our politics has changed and the extreme right and the extreme left have kind of joined forces right now. And they are not convinced that Ukraine needs to be saved. You know, they're perfectly willing to see Ukraine be defeated by Putin because they are living under a whole lot of illusions. They say it's a Christian nation and Putin is

defending now our Christian civilization and so forth. They're completely wrong about that but unfortunately they've become an important part of the political voices that are determining American policy. It could happen in Europe. They're going to be parliamentary elections and there's some expectation that these populist parties are going to do well in Europe as well. I hope not but you know that's real risk that we face.

Nino Gelashvili: Yes, very challenging time for the liberal democracy and very challenging stage. How would you call it? How would you describe it? What's the name of this stage? It's definite and clear that that's not the end of liberal democracy, but a very, very hard time now.

Francis Fukuyama: Well, I don't know. I don't have a good name for the period. We've called it a democratic recession because democracies have fallen in number and they've also fallen in quality in many parts of the world. The real question is - is this a kind of momentary setback and then the pendulum will swing back in the other direction and democracy will regain its self-confidence or does this represent a longer-term decline? - and I think that it's very hard to know. I would say however that there are real disadvantages of authoritarian government they get into, they alienate their own people, they make bad decisions, they don't do well economically. And so, I think in the long run there's still good reasons why people prefer to live in democracies. I think if you need proof of this, just ask yourself where do people coming out of violent, war-torn, poor, badly governed countries want to go to? - they don't want to go to Russia, they don't want to go to China, they don't want to go to Iran. They want to go to Europe, they want to go to the United States, they want to go to democratic countries where their children are going to have opportunities, where they can get security and so forth. And I think people voting with their feet kind of indicate that liberal democracy is still, you know, by far a superior system.

Nino Gelashvili: What or who could be the savior of liberal democracy?

Francis Fukuyama: Well, look, it's got to be the people themselves. That's what it means to live in a liberal democracy, that you're depending on the belief of citizens to defend their rights and their freedoms. And if they don't want to do it, then there's nothing you can do to save them.

Nino Gelashvili: Not a knight on a white horse.

Francis Fukuyama: No, no.

Nino Gelashvili: Or a strong man, as some people think.

Ukraine's integration into NATO: it's declared that Ukraine will be in NATO, but it's also stated that it will not happen until the war ends. Is that…

Francis Fukuyama: Well, it's a very complicated scenario, but I think that the war does not have to end in the sense of being an actual peace agreement there. I actually don't think that this is very likely at any point in the foreseeable future - that either Ukraine will completely eject Russia from all of the territories it's occupied or that it's not going to accept that kind of loss of territory. And it's not likely that Russia is simply going to give up its attempt to subdue Ukraine.

But you can imagine a ceasefire, that's not a formal peace and that brings active combat to a halt. And under those conditions, I think you can talk about NATO membership. There are a number of precedents for this. So, for example, the Korean War has never ended. There's never been a peace agreement in Korea, but there was an armistice in 1953, and that allowed South Korea to join in an alliance with the United States that has existed up to the present. It's possible that you could get a termination of active conflict, not a peace agreement, but a termination of conflict. At that point, I think NATO membership, it's not just possible, it's absolutely necessary, because I don't see Putin ever giving up on his desire to conquer the whole of Ukraine. And the only way that you can stop this, I think, is through membership in NATO.

Nino Gelashvili: Chances the conflict, I mean, the war in Ukraine, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, escapes of its control and spreads wider. What are the chances?

Francis Fukuyama: Well, I think it really does depend on what happens in Ukraine itself. Ukrainians have been very successful in destroying a lot of the Russian army. They've managed to sink about a third of the ships in the Black Sea Fleet. They've had very remarkable success in physically stopping the Russians. And depending on how that war goes, Russia, I think at the moment, doesn't really have the capability to attack other countries because 99% of its army is actually tied up in Ukraine itself. So I think that conflict will determine then what happens in other theaters.

Nino Gelashvili: Let me ask about your being now in Tbilisi, because you are in Tbilisi for another season of the Leadership Academy for Development, which is organized jointly by Stanford University and the Economic Policy Research Center. in partnership with Free University of Tbilisi. It's the sixth season, right? And I know the competition is growing and

growing I mean the of those who want to join this these process. Why do you think it has become that successful?

Francis Fukuyama: What we try to do is to take people who are already demonstrated leaders that have done important things, but also have the potential to go on and do further great things in their careers. I represent a university, and what does a university do? We don't give advice. We're not a consulting firm. We train people. And I think we've developed a program that trains people to think about how to bring about change in real world conditions. Not an academic theoretical exercise, but, really what you need to do to reform governments, to fight corruption, to mobilize people, this sort of thing. I think it's been a pretty successful curriculum. And I think the other important thing is to build a network of Georgians and people from, Armenia, even we have somebody from Azerbaijan in this year's class, Ukrainians.

Nino Gelashvili: And there were some in 2019 when I was there.

Francis Fukuyama: Yes, that's right. We want to build networks and people that believe in democratic values should be able to work with each other, should be able to cooperate, should be able to offer each other mutual support. And I think people appreciate that part of it also, the fellowship and the personal connections that this program creates.

Nino Gelashvili: And very last thing: why do you think you are that important for Mr. Lavrov. He quotes you, not accurately, but he quotes you and uses your concept as an argument for himself. You were the one who happened to be sanctioned [by Russia] in the first place together with the US president and his family. Why do you think you are that important [to Lavrov], it's obvious you are but why?

Francis Fukuyama: Well, I think that the End of History, the idea of the End of History really annoys people that were products of that Soviet system because it basically tells them that they have no future. And they resent that and I think that's probably the reason that he keeps harping on that. You know, basically in certain ways, the Soviet Union never died. It just was transmuted into present-day Russia. And I think they admire the same historical record. They have the same imperialist objectives. They behave in a very similar manner. And they don't like the idea that they're at dead end in terms of historical development.

Nino Gelashvili: And he once said that you admitted that you were wrong then. But I think it's just opposite. They know that their interpretation is wrong actually about the End of History concert and that the liberal democracy hasn't ended.

Francis Fukuyama: Well, unfortunately many people never actually read the article or the book all that carefully, so they can say that.

Nino Gelashvili: Yeah. Okay, thank you.