

## Georgia: The Interconnections between Democracy and Security

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### Abstract

Georgia needs democracy to ensure close ties with the West and prevent a recurrence of the kind of poor decision-making that led to the August 2008 war with Russia. Although Georgia made some progress in building democracy until November 2007, the events of that month and subsequently reversed those advances. The current period is marked by relative calm, but Georgia's democratic development faces key tests in the 2010 local elections, 2012 parliamentary elections, and the 2013 presidential elections.

### No Security Without Democracy

Political events in Georgia since the Rose Revolution are deeply entwined with a narrative of democracy. Because of Georgia's need and desire to be more closely aligned with the West, advancing democracy and showcasing its democratic "values" takes on an additional import. For Georgia, the link between democracy and security is clear and direct. Without the former, the latter will continue to be elusive and Georgia will remain prone to rash and insulated decision-making that result in foreign policy misadventures of the kind seen in August 2008.

For Georgia, like other Eastern European countries, most clearly the Baltic States, NATO membership is key to securing themselves against the ongoing threat presented by Russia. Given the politics of NATO and its internal divisions over antagonizing Russia, there is certainly no guarantee that should Georgia ever become a consolidated democracy that it would automatically become a member of NATO. However, the continued failure of Georgia to become democratic will make it very easy for NATO to continue to exclude Georgia. The same holds true of Georgia's EU aspiration.

The constant, if moderate, political instability in Georgia is also a hindrance to the country's growth and development. This instability manifests itself through frequent street demonstrations, persistent government harassment of opposition figures, the resignations of numerous government officials since 2004, frequent cabinet shakeups and, of course, the disastrous military defeat in 2008. For Georgia, greater democracy will likely tone down the rhetoric and nationalist anger, disperse power, and contribute to better decision making, which will, in turn reduce the chronic instability in Georgia. In Georgia, weak democratic institutions in the almost two decades of independence have contributed to much political instability, suggesting that in Georgia, it is not democracy that is causing instability. Accordingly, deepening democracy in Georgia is not only a moral imperative, but a key to stabilizing both the country and the wider South Caucasus.

### Democracy in Georgia

The Rose Revolution was initially viewed as a major democratic breakthrough for Georgia and a harbinger for further democratization in the region. The initial excitement surrounding the charismatic President Mikheil Saakashvili and the contrast between his energetic administration and that of his predecessor, obscured the more complicated reality of the democratic developments in Georgia since 2004. Early in Saakashvili's first term the democratic promise of the Rose Revolution began to dissipate, though many policymakers in Brussels, and especially in Washington, ignored these warnings.

The first indication of this was a set of constitutional amendments which were approved in February 2004, very shortly after Saakashvili took office. Both the substance of these amendments and the process through which they were adopted should have raised concerns about the democratic intentions of the new government.

Substantively, these amendments restructured much of the government and made the presidency far more powerful than before. Under the new constitution the government was restructured to create a prime minister who would be appointed by the president and preside over a council of ministers, whom he would appoint, thus weakening the parliament. The president, however, retained the right to directly appoint the key posts of ministers of defense, interior and security. The president was also given the right to dissolve this council of ministers. While the prime minister and his government could be impeached by 60 percent of parliament, such a vote would not affect the president. Additionally, the president was given the ability to dissolve parliament if it failed to ratify the budget—thus effectively diminishing the parliament's role in budget making. The president was also allowed to appoint governors and mayors throughout the country.

The process by which the constitutional amendments were passed signaled an additional shortcoming which

continued to dog Georgia's democratization throughout the post-Rose Revolution period: the government's willingness to move quickly without paying sufficient attention to legal processes and democratic structures. The amendments were passed by the rump parliament, which, in early 2004, consisted of 75 people who had been elected in the disputed 2003 parliamentary election to single-mandate districts and 150 MPs who remained from the previous parliament. These members would not be replaced until the March 2004 parliamentary elections. While this parliament would not, on the surface, seem as friendly to Saakashvili as the new one, these returning MPs were eager to curry favor with the new president. Those who did not seek the president's favor were cajoled and threatened, as needed, into supporting the new amendments. As a result, the amendments were passed through parliament very quickly, not allowing for sufficient, and legally required, debate and public discussion.

Georgia's democratic development since the Rose Revolution can usefully be divided into two periods, with the dividing line being November 2007. Before November 2007, there were clear problems with democracy in Georgia. The constitutional amendments, the emergence of a one-party system with strong ties between the ruling party and the state, a less-free media climate, the government's willingness to manipulate the election law, and its persistent tendency to cut democratic corners in order to expedite its legislative reforms were evidence of this.

But, during this pre-November 2007 period, some genuine progress and successful state-building took place. The government took strong steps to reduce petty corruption, especially in the police and education sectors. Opposition media, while harassed from time to time, was allowed to broadcast nationally. Although election laws were often manipulated, elections, particularly in 2004, were conducted better than they ever had been in Georgia. Democratic development in Georgia during this time could be accurately described as not a priority for the government, but there was still some reason to think that Georgia was moving in the right direction.

This all changed after November 2007. During that month, the Georgian government violently dispersed peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi using water canons, baton-wielding security forces and acoustic weaponry. The dispersal of the demonstrations occurred alongside increased media repression as Georgia's most powerful independent media outlet, Imedi TV, also fell victim to violent repression as police broke into the studio, destroyed equipment and effectively shut down the station.

Shortly after the crackdown, Saakashvili resigned briefly before being reelected in a snap election in January 2008. Unfortunately, that election as well as the parliamentary election that occurred in May of that year were not of the caliber of previous elections in post-Rose Revolution Georgia. In both cases, the ruling party won strong victories amidst reports that the government deployed extensive resources to help the ruling party, including providing unequal access to media, to ensure the desired outcome.

During the roughly two and a half years since the crackdown of November 2007, there have been ongoing concerns about Georgia's media freedoms, government surveillance, continued concentration of power in the presidency and interior ministry, the absence of an independent judiciary and a parliament that is even weaker than in the years immediately following the Rose Revolution.

In the spring and summer of 2009 street demonstrations tied up parts of downtown Tbilisi for much of the period from April to July. This time the government did not violently disperse the demonstrators, as it sought, and received, much commendation for this in the West. But European observers were concerned about the harassment and beatings of demonstrators, often in the evenings, by forces that were believed to be from the interior ministry.

The Georgian government appears, at least at the highest levels, to understand the country's democratic shortfalls. Since November 2007, President Saakashvili has on several occasions, once in September of 2008 and once shortly before Vice President Biden's visit in the summer of 2009, pledged to redouble his efforts to bring democracy to Georgia, even calling for renewing the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili also appointed a special minister for working on democracy issues. However, these gestures and statements are intended primarily for the consumption of an increasingly critical international community and are rarely translated into meaningful actions or institutional reforms.

While the excesses of the Georgian government are certainly one of the reasons for democracy failing to grow in Georgia following the Rose Revolution, it is far from the only reason. The Georgian government, for its part, has accused the opposition of making personal attacks, issuing unrealistic demands, such as the president's resignation, and, in some cases, cooperating with the Russian security and intelligence forces. The government has also criticized the opposition for being neither disciplined nor substantive. While these criticisms are, in many cases, true, they obscure both the govern-

ment's role in ensuring the weakness of the opposition as well as the bigger structural problems which Georgian democracy faces. Since independence, the failure to develop a meaningful multi-party system has hindered democratic development in Georgia and made it susceptible to being ruled by dominant party systems, such as the current one controlled by the United National Movement (UNM). Substantive differences and political interests among the Georgian electorate, are weak, and are not reflected in political party platforms. The link between pursuing economic and other interests and pursuing political goals is not strong in Georgia as many see politics as an elite activity with little bearing on ordinary people. Instead, nearly two decades after independence, political parties are leadership-dominated and defined almost entirely by their relationship to the party in power.

Similarly, Georgian civil society and media remain weak. The increased government control of the media and the decline of strong civil society organizations that could act as watchdogs over the government, also are seen in the weakness of local organizations, the relative absence of community groups and a critical shortfall of social capital.

### The Current Situation

Georgia entered 2010 with a political system that was dominated by Saakashvili's UNM. In addition to holding the presidency, the UNM had a big majority in parliament and controlled every local government in the country. Additionally, almost all people holding appointed office, including big city mayors, were either members of, or sympathetic to, the UNM. The parliament had only two parties: the UNM and the Christian Democrats.

The last half of 2009 and first months of 2010 were considerably calmer than the previous twelve months.

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#### *Recommended Reading:*

- Sabine Freizer, "Georgia's Constitutional Amendments: A Setback for Democratization?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analysis*, February 11, 2004.
- Miriam Lansky and Giorgi Areshidze, "Georgia's Year of Turmoil," *Journal of Democracy* 19:4, October 2008.
- Lincoln Mitchell, "Compromising Democracy: State Building in Saakashvili's Georgia," *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 28 No. 2 (Summer 2009): 171-183
- ISFED election monitoring reports: <http://www.isfed.ge/eng/elections/reports/>.
- OSCE/ODIHR election reports: <http://www.osce.org/odihr-elections/30930.html>.

Unfortunately, there is also little evidence that democracy has advanced in Georgia during this period. Media did not become freer, but instead remained largely under the strong influence of the government. The government also abandoned the promise made by Saakashvili at the United Nations in September 2009 that the mayors of all big cities would be elected, instead only allowing elections for the mayor of Tbilisi. The early negotiations around that election resulted in the government successfully insisting on a highly unusual 30 percent threshold in the first round that was broadly understood as a way to ensure that Gigi Ugulava, the government candidate, would not have to run against the leading opposition candidate, Irakli Alasania, in a runoff.

The absence of any major events, demonstrations or immediate crises during this period has lent a "calm before the storm" feel to the Georgian political environment. The next three years, beginning with the Tbilisi mayoral race in May 2010, will feature three major elections and will be a critical period for Georgia's democratic development and overall stability.

The 2010 local elections and 2012 parliamentary elections will be important on their own but will also help set the stage for the 2013 presidential elections which will determine who will succeed Saakashvili, who is constitutionally barred from seeking another term as president. If Georgia makes it through the next three years with some stability and an orderly transition to a new president through an election that is broadly viewed as free and fair, there will be real reasons for optimism for Georgia's future. Achieving this will not be easy, however, and will require sustained engagement and vigilance from what is an increasingly Georgia-fatigued international community.