

Georgia Post-2013: The Road to the Presidential Elections and Beyond

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Abstract

It is hard to believe that by 2013, President Mikheil Saakashvili, then aged 46, will withdraw from politics when his second term in office ends. This young president has shown himself too ambitious to simply put down the pen and vacate the presidential palace for an early retirement. In order to understand what lies on the road ahead for Georgia before and after the 2013 presidential elections, it is essential to look at the current political trends and developments in a country that still sees its western course challenged by its powerful Russian neighbor in a geopolitically contested region.

The Political Future of Mikheil Saakashvili

While it can be excluded that President Saakashvili will run for a third presidential term in 2013, it cannot be ruled out that he will follow some variant of a Putin–Medvedev model in order to maintain a powerful political position after 2013. To this end, he may transform the Georgian political system from a presidential to a semi-presidential or (in a far less likely scenario) to a parliamentary system, creating a new post for himself via amendments to the constitution before his term in office ends. But Georgia is not Russia, and even if the president pushes for a candidate loyal to him to rise to power in 2013, or even if he manages to create a meaningful post for himself, it remains unclear whether this strategy would bear fruit in the long-run or would simply prepare the way for proper transition of power.

Nevertheless, the legal basis for such changes may be put into place sooner rather than later, possibly even before the parliamentary elections in 2012, as a commission to review the Constitution is already in place. Although this process, which has been endorsed by the Venice Commission, seems to be a participatory one at first glance, Saakashvili holds the necessary power to modify a new draft Constitution to his advantage at any point convenient for him.

Whereas it is no secret that the reform efforts of President Saakashvili have somehow lost momentum in recent years and that some domestic as well as international observers have been quite critical of his policies, his hold on power remains almost unchallenged, due to the fact that he has devised a system of tight control which rests on four pillars, namely control over the distribution of wealth, excessive role of the state security forces, politicization of other state institutions, and management of information.¹

¹ The authors conscientiously do not use the phrase information control, paying tribute to the fact that TV channels and newspapers echoing the views of the opposition exist in Georgia.

The Government's Grip on Wealth and Media

In Georgia, the accumulation and distribution of wealth is still largely dependent on the consent of the government. The “state fund bubble”, which has been inflated by recent foreign development assistance, is often selectively distributed via an elite-dominated network of corruption combining state actors with Georgian economic players. Protest regarding the government's approach is rather ineffective, as the Ministry of the Interior, headed by Vano Merabishvili, and the Ministry of Justice, headed by Zurab Adeishvili, stand firmly behind government policies, preventing any changes to current practices. Thus, the state appears as an oppressive force which sees its policies through despite criticism voiced by civil society actors questioning the official government views.

An important means the government uses to suppress its public critics is its influence over the media. Transparency International provided a very telling summary of the situation in November 2009, noting that “Today, Georgia's media is less free and pluralistic than it was before the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the ousting of President Eduard Shevardnadze.” Another case in point is the March 2010 broadcast by *Imedi TV* of a mock-documentary about a new Russian invasion, which was meant to draw attention to a persistent Russian threat. The way it was presented, however, caused a severe outcry among the Georgian population and drew a worrisome picture of the extent the state is willing to permit information directed at the public to be manipulated in order to serve its purpose. Since then, the opening of Channel 2 with a declared aim to accord equal airtime to all parties may signal attempts to steer a different course.

Nevertheless, voluntary censorship on the one hand, and disproportionate representation of opposition channels and misinformation (spread not only by the government-controlled channels, but also by channels close to the opposition), on the other hand, are still contribut-

ing to the lack of thoughtful commentary about politics and policies in the public sphere. At the same time, constructive criticism and disagreement with the administration's policies from within its own structures remain absent. This phenomenon results from a concentration of power in the hands of the president who demands absolute loyalty from the people serving in government institutions and the presidential bureaucracy.

Room for Political Change

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the government has constructed a system that does not leave much room for new challengers to rise or political changes, the possibility of change before or during 2013 still exists. It is especially likely if the current ruling circle—including the president and his closest confidants (all of whom have not yet demonstrated any presidential ambitions) Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria, and Minister of Justice Zurab Adishvili—fails to agree on a future model for Georgia.² Any erosion of the current unity among the ruling elite may lead to unexpected changes, possibly including public unrest. It must be kept in mind, however, that even in the case of unanticipated changes, most potential future political leaders visible in the Georgian political landscape today represent a certain continuity, as they can be regarded as products of either this or the previous administration. Nonetheless, the domestic political landscape in Georgia is currently undergoing some transformations.

Most notably, the recent municipal elections—administered in a better way than previous ones although still far from flawless³—are remarkable in two ways: First, the results passed unchallenged and without people taking to the streets. Second, the mayor of Tbilisi, Gigi Ugulava, has been directly elected for the first time. The vote lent credence to his ability to govern and made him more confident, which may enable him to challenge the current establishment and its course from within. Given his presidential ambitions, Ugulava represents another strong, charismatic leader in the ruling party, whom Saakashvili may need to accom-

2 The current mayor of Tbilisi, Giorgi Ugulava, used to belong to President Saakashvili's inner ruling circle, but due to some unspecified developments, it is speculated that he is no longer part of it. The reason may be presidential ambitions or disagreement with the future political model to be imposed on Georgia.

3 For a full assessment of the May 30, 2010 Elections see: International Election Observation Mission: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2010/05/44179_en.pdf.

modate in the run-up to 2013 so as not to risk internal party divisions.

Meanwhile, opposition leaders such as Irakli Alasania, Davit Usupashvili or Salome Zourabishvili essentially propose to continue the reform efforts and western orientation Saakashvili has attempted during his presidency, promising improvements and corrections of the administration's domestic and foreign policy mistakes. At the same time a new political force has begun to take shape in recent months. Promising a different course based on closer relations with Russia, it may come to represent a challenge to the existing political direction of the country, if it manages to consolidate the current nascent trends and to be embraced by a sufficient number of the Georgian electorate.

The Russia Factor in Domestic Politics

Amidst a rising sense of dependency on Russia after the August War and a perception that the West is taking an increasingly hesitant attitude toward Georgia, former Speaker of the Parliament Nino Burjanadze and former Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli have emerged as examples of political figures catering to the possibility of restoring ties to Russia. Burjanadze is eager for to return to political power while Nogaideli is a technocrat, who some claim may be able to run the country. The two highlight the benefits of a closer alliance with Russia for a discontented part of the population negatively affected by the deteriorated situation regarding South Ossetia and Abkhazia,⁴ the unilateral Russian embargo on Georgian goods, the post-war economic decline and the effects of the global financial and economic crisis.

In addition, the closure of the Russo-Georgian border has put great strain on the large Georgian Diaspora living and working in Russia in terms of supporting and communicating with relatives and friends on their native soil. These circumstances underline the vulnerability of Georgia vis-à-vis its powerful northern neighbor and in the absence of a closer and improved relationship with western allies⁵ that provides a solid sense of secu-

4 The authors acknowledge that the Abkhaz and South Ossetian issues need to be dealt with more constructively in order to achieve sustained progress in Georgia. The problem is far reaching and cannot be addressed within the limits of this analysis. Strong political will and a change in discourse would be needed to start tackling the issues at hand. Among other things, the respective societies would have to be prepared for and engaged in a long-term process aiming at normalization without quick payoffs or misguided hopes for a resolution or reintegration of the territories in the short-term.

5 Two developments are noteworthy in this regard: 1) Saakashvili was denied any official visit with Western leaders for almost

rity, underscore the importance of normalization with Russia to an increasing number of Georgians—even if it comes at a cost. Russia has supported this new political force and even facilitated its rise through a series of meetings with high-ranking Russian officials in Moscow. Despite the fact that Russia restrained itself from conquering Georgia in 2008, it has not given up its hopes for home-grown regime change, which it actively supports in order to help a more convenient administration rise to power in Georgia.

While weakening the opposition, Burjanadze and Nogatideli's moves seem to have been welcomed by Saakashvili, who uses their pronouncements to polarize the domestic debate and sell himself once again as a pro-western hero against pro-Russian villains—a theme not entirely new to Georgian politics—meanwhile distracting from domestic problems and polishing his own image as the defender of western values in the eyes of Europe and the US. The president's effort represents an indistinct picture of his rule aimed at distorting the actual situation and also underlines his strategy to discredit all opposition figures based on their real pro-Russian aspirations or a construct thereof. Despite this political game, it cannot be ignored that the pressure Georgia is facing from Russia remains real. A pro-Russian course led by a new Georgian administration after 2013, although currently no more than a theoretical construct, would severely limit the country's sovereign foreign and domestic policy conduct and push against western influence in the entire region.

The Geopolitical Environment: Turkey and Russia

Nevertheless, what will happen until 2013, thus paving the road for post-2013 Georgia, does not entirely depend on internal developments, but may also be heavily influenced by external factors. In a nutshell, if Georgia remains a focal point of western interest and if the West manages to provide a credible sense of security to Georgia and to find a way to motivate and hold the administration accountable for a process of democratic reforms, it may be possible to refocus the current domestic development path on sustainable modernization efforts. However, if the West decreases its involvement and loses interest in the country, the possibility for a political turn towards Russia and subsequent Russian influence permeating social and political structures

two years after the war and 2) Turkish, Kazakh, and Arab/Eastern foreign direct investments increase as western ones decline. This is also mirrored as increasing official rhetorical adherence towards these states.

in Georgia may no longer be excluded. These developments would pose a threat, not only to Georgia, but also to the West.

While Russia's desire to dominate the region does present a necessary condition to threaten western influence, it alone will not be sufficient to achieve this aim without an important ally by its side, namely Turkey. If the West continues to alienate Turkey, the country may well strengthen its eastern foreign policy vector by enhancing its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asian region, whereby also seeking closer ties with Russia. This *Realpolitik*-approach, combined with established economic and military interdependencies in the region, would be sufficient for Russia to strangle Georgia whenever it desired and thereby divide the region into a Turkish and Russian sphere of influence, while the unconsolidated western powers would be pushed into the position of mere bystanders.

Although these remain distant threats for the time being, civil society actors in Georgia are taking note of the fact that a creeping change is taking place in the domestic political arena. Unease about the government's increasingly sophisticated methods to lever out democratic processes and the greater likelihood of renewed Russian influence in Georgia and its negative consequences for the country's development path is spreading. This is perceived not only as a short-term danger to the country, but one that could have detrimental long-term effects, as it would put one of the greatest hopes for Georgia's future in jeopardy, namely true change administered by those who not only pay lip service to, but embrace western and European values and are willing to put them into practice.

Georgia Divided

The struggle permeating Georgian society today is one between future-oriented segments and those who have settled for a way of doing business as usual and who are geared to the past. The growing fragmentation within Georgia needs to be addressed in order for the "Europeanization project" not to fail. Consensus building and increasing compatibility between liberal and traditional values through domestic political and social processes would be a valuable first step. Realizing the potential for domestic consensus that a reform of the political system and a new constitution may yield, understanding and mobilizing overlapping interests of different parties, as well as reinvigorating the stalled reform process and strengthening—instead of weakening—the pro-western force that civil society represents, would be logical steps to follow. For now, however, these remain pipe dreams.

But the years 2012–2013 are important precisely due to the fact that—at least in theory—there exists the possibility of a new pro-European reformist coalition (including some of the best among those now in power) coming to power. Nevertheless, if the present administration fails to take the necessary steps to modify the current course, it may divide society even further amidst a polarized political environment and create the conditions that will make radical changes to the system seem necessary. Russia would be the likely benefactor of a fragmented Georgian society confronted with continuous political strife. It could easily foster and take advantage of this domestic divide in order to strengthen its own position, not only in Georgia, but possibly in the entire region.

Three Scenarios

The *First Scenario* that follows from the text envisions a Georgia that sees its internal and external developments strengthened by sustained western support, including a partnership where problems can be openly addressed, while consensual solutions and accountability are properly monitored. Pro-western forces and civil society are tactically embraced, improving Georgia's image abroad. A culture of constructive criticism conditions a new openness that lends room to freedom of expression. The process of reviewing the constitution gains participatory character and helps to assess Georgia's recent political past and build consensus for a more inclusive future. A reassured public can fend off destructive attempts by outside powers to interfere with Georgian internal affairs and the attempts to support opposition forces within the country only further a pluralist political environment. As the political landscape transforms following the positive trend demonstrated by the recent municipal elections and after procedures are improved and substance follows suit, the likelihood of moving towards free and fair elections in 2013 increases, preparing the way for a new pro-western coalition with a moderate attitude towards Russia to take over and govern the country. The positive and democratic developments in Georgia give new impetus to conflict transformation efforts, which gradually develop in a more constructive direction.

The *Second Scenario* suggests that western support for Georgia continues in the established frameworks, but is not perceived as a serious commitment or as sufficiently strong to ensure the adherence to the Europeanization project by the government. While the administration mostly focuses on and rhetorically defends its achieve-

ments, a laissez faire attitude among the western allies relieves the government of pressure for a more critical assessment and much needed accountability. Uncontested set-backs in democratic developments peak in the institutionalization of light authoritarianism. President Saakashvili manages to find an effective method to promote a successor that grants him sustained influence extending beyond 2013. Relations with Russia remain hard to improve thereafter and are marked by occasional Russian attempts to meddle in Georgia's internal affairs by various means. Unable to resist the temptations of polarized and personalized politics, political processes with the semblance of democracy are nevertheless proposed occasionally. Filling them with substance can only be achieved in the long-term and in accordance with political will, which in turn depends on external and internal pressures. As a growing part of the public returns to doing business as usual; the future-oriented segments devoted to European values are experiencing the pressure of marginalization. Due to strong convictions, they nevertheless continue their work under difficult conditions, pushing for change. Progress and meaningful changes are slowed down. Meanwhile, internal cohesion remains, due to a strong sense of tradition, culture, and nationalism, supported by the religious establishment. Georgia is unable to develop its immense potential, which also impacts any efforts to transform the territorial conflicts in a productive fashion.

The *Third Scenario* that can be inferred from the discussion above is that the West turns its back on Georgia due to unsatisfactory progress which is perceived as a mockery to its western allies. Russian support within the country gains momentum, particularly as Russia exploits internal weaknesses until a friendly regime comes to power in Georgia. External manipulation in the form of mobilizing discontented segments of society and toying with ethnic grievances creates a constant threat of disintegration, in an atmosphere of divide and rule. Polarized politics and a regime of tight state control are the only means to induce a certain level of stability, while the potential for internal strife as well as renewed conflicts increases. Over time, Georgia grows increasingly dependent on Russia and Turkey, which tighten their control over the region, marginalizing western influence. Georgia's change of course has detrimental effects for regional developments, especially as civil society actors throughout the region have long looked to it as an inspiration for democratic and free development.

(please see overleaf for information about the authors)

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European Partnership and the South Caucasus: Framework Condition for a Grand Bargain in 2025?

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Abstract

The future of the South Caucasus will depend to a large extent on overcoming geopolitical rivalry in the region and establishing working relations among the key external actors with influence in the region. A peaceful transformation of the region requires the successful management of the common neighborhoods between Russia and the EU. In fact, in the future, the EU, much more than the US, will emerge as the main player in region, as its interests are driven not only by immediate strategic, but also by far sighted economic and social considerations. In order to create the conditions which facilitate first and foremost the stability of this troubled region, the EU will need to work towards drawing Russia and the US into a larger European security framework which will necessitate close cooperation with other external players and international organizations.

Main Players in the Region

Good framework conditions between Russia and the West remain essential to addressing many of the more difficult challenges to regional and international peace and security. The tentative debate on a new security order for a wider Europe, which began in the wake of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's reaffirmed policy of modernization and the "resetting" of US–Russia relations, highlights the value of a comprehensive partnership between the West and Russia. Both sides share far more than just common history and geography. At the same time since the beginning of the 21st century, mutual estrangement, misunderstandings, and divergent perceptions and narratives have created a framework within which crises have divided Russia from the West and have divided the West over the question of how to deal with Russia.

The South Caucasus remains a focal point in that respect as the region is situated at the interface of the EU's Eastern Partnership and Black Sea Synergy Initiative, and is in the remit of the greater Middle East and new energy supply projects from Central Eurasia to Europe. The Georgia crisis—as well as the unresolved conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and the explosive situation in the Northern Caucasus—have demonstrated amply the large potential for conflict in the South Cau-

casus region. The fundamental question to both Russia and the West is whether the two sides will find ways to create conditions which are conducive to successfully manage conflict. In the years to come, the bulk of responsibility for managing substantive relations with Russia as well as the neighboring countries of the post-Soviet space, will clearly lie with the European Union and its member states, as their interests in this region are driven not only by strategic consideration (as is the case with the US), but also by cooperative economic ones.

The EU and its member states, but also Turkey as an emerging regional power, will need to find a re-politicized strategic approach to developments in the European neighborhood—not only by supporting bilaterally a challenging political, social and economic reform process within the South Caucasus countries, but also by engaging with new economic and mobility incentives with the region and regional powers as a whole. The big test for the EU's Eastern Partnership and strategic relations will be to unlock the region's potential for intra-regional cooperation by a comprehensive and transformative Eastern Policy which uses a sectorial approach to bring Russia closer to the EU.

The challenge will, however, by far exceed the necessity of cooperation in economics, societal transformation,