



Center for Strategic & International Studies  
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## **Democratization and Conflict in Georgia**

Featuring:

David Darchiashvili

*Executive Director, Open Society – Georgia Foundation*

and

Ghia Nodia

*Chairman, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD)*

Moderated by

Cory Welt

*Deputy Director, Russia and Eurasia Program, CSIS*

**Tuesday, February 28, 2006**

**3:00 P.M. - 4:30 P.M.**

On Tuesday, February 28, 2006, the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program sponsored a round table discussion, "Democratization and Conflict in Georgia." David Darchiashvili delivered commentary on Georgia's unresolved conflicts, and Ghia Nodia spoke about democratization in Georgia. Dr. Cory Welt made introductory remarks. Below is a summary of Dr. Nodia's and Dr. Darchiashvili's remarks.

**Dr. Nodia** first observed that two extreme views on Georgia's democratic progression exist. The first extreme is represented by President Mikheil Saakashvili's view that Georgia is already a consolidated democracy. The second is the view presented in a Georgian human rights organization's report ("Next Stop Belarus?") that Georgia is on its way to dictatorship. Nodia disagreed with both extremes. The Rose Revolution was a positive event in Georgia, he said, and the "second-best option" after constitutional change, which was not possible at that time. "Georgia continues to be a semi-democratic and semi-authoritarian political regime," however. "Although, today there is a very different blend of democratic and authoritarian tendencies than we had under Shevardnadze."

There are several defects and concerns with democracy in Georgia today. The main defect is the concentration of power in the executive. There are no real checks and balances in the system. In February 2004, constitutional amendments were passed to strengthen the president and weaken the parliament. This, according to Nodia, was "the most non-democratic step of this government." The presence of a strong executive, moreover, exposes the weakness of other government institutions. The judiciary was not independent under Shevardnadze's time, but now it is even less so. Some government representatives justify this by noting that if the judiciary were not under the government's influence, it would be under the influence of organized crime.

While pressure on the independent media is not as serious a problem in Georgia as it is in other semi-authoritarian states, it is still an issue. However, Nodia said that "the picture is not so unbalanced" in Georgia; the public is quite well-informed on the processes going on in the country, and there are quite a few talk shows that are either fully oppositional or present a balance of different views.

There is also weakness in the opposition, but this is due more to lack of public support and institutional defects rather than government pressure. Still, "[m]ore normal relations between the

government and the opposition are necessary to institute constitutional change in Georgia, and we do not have this.” The good news is that Georgia has a goal-oriented government which likes to provide public goods. Nodia ended by suggesting that the type of government Georgia has today might best be characterized as “authoritarian modernization lite.”

During the discussion period, Nodia was asked whether the consolidation of executive power and reports of human rights violations and corruption mean that Georgia cannot really be said to be on a democratic path. He responded that these examples do not contradict his assessment of Georgia’s “authoritarian modernization” approach to state-building, nor an eventually consolidated democratic state. Darchiashvili added that violations, while real, are not as extensive as they sometimes are made out to be.

Nodia responded to questions on the status of religious organizations and minority groups in Georgia. He observed that the government is insecure in its relationship with religion, having developed a reputation as a “Soros government,” i.e. dominated by an overly liberal agenda that is pernicious for Georgian identity and culture. Since the risk of a public backlash against a government that is allegedly neither Georgian nor Orthodox enough exists, the government is fairly liberal on religious pluralism issues but “pragmatically populist in terms of Christianity and nationalism.” The government wants to instill a civic, state-oriented nationalism in society, not an ethnically-oriented one. Nodia also remarked that the government would like to effect policies to increase the integration of ethnic minorities into society, but it has yet to figure out how to do so.

Regarding government pressure on NGOs and the media, Nodia replied that there has been pressure on electronic media, but that there is not really pressure on NGOs since the government does not consider them all that important. This sentiment, however, also leads to an official state of mind that “the good people are in government [now, so] why do we need NGOs?”

In his remarks, **Dr. Darchiashvili** spoke about Georgia’s regional conflicts. In the beginning he made a general remark that there were many groups involved in the Rose Revolution, and “not everybody in the post-revolution elite is like-minded.” In addition, there are counter-revolutionary forces. As a result, actors in Georgian society have a very dichotomous outlook on issues since the revolution, and the view that all issues are black or white characterizes Georgian political discourse. This general, post-revolutionary socio-political climate also has its impact on Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian relations.

Since the Rose Revolution, “these conflicts are de-freezing.” The current leadership is invested in state building and will not tolerate situations of uncontrolled territories or borders. There is an ongoing discussion within the government about policy toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After the Rose Revolution, the government went through three stages with regard to the conflicts. Darchiashvili termed the first stage “aggressive peacefulness,” attempting to export the Rose Revolution to South Ossetia. When this failed, the government took a more militant stance. This second stage also did not last long, leading the government to take on an approach of “energetic pragmatism.” However, this new prudence, gained through experience, has now been exposed to “open hostility from Russia in a way that has never been experienced before.” While Georgia suggests unilateral confidence-building approaches in these regions, Russia takes a hostile approach and is promoting developments in Kosovo as an example for these regions.

Darchiashvili acknowledged that post-revolutionary government policy toward conflict resolution has at times been contradictory. On the one hand, the government, with help from the West, has been working on finding peaceful solutions to the conflicts. On the other hand, until recently, these actions were occasionally accompanied by “not-so-peaceful statements by officials.” However, increased patience can also be witnessed: with regard to the parliamentary resolution on the activity of Russian peacekeepers, Darchiashvili noted that the final resolution did not include a deadline for withdrawal of troops. He acknowledged, however, that “extra-diplomatic” notes sometimes creep into Georgian political discourse, but there are attempts to correct this and to be as cautious as possible.

What now is to be done? There are too many actors involved with the conflicts, and the government has to figure out how to deal with all of them. Its approach toward Russia should be very prudent and accompanied with a firmness that will not incite a military response. The West should be appealed to for direct support in combination with the adoption of proper policies toward Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Georgia should try to “abstain from militant statements and steps” and “confidence-building measures should be a priority.” Political solutions to these conflicts should move forward only after there has been success with the confidence-building measures.

In its own society, Georgia needs “genuine promotion of the rule of law,” “improv[ements] in governmental accountability, and “participation of society in governmental affairs.” In all these areas, 2006 is a crucial year for Georgia’s future, especially in its ongoing relationship with NATO through the International Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) assessment period. Darchiashvili observed that progression towards a membership action plan (MAP) with NATO would contribute to further democratization in Georgia.

Darchiashvili was asked if there was a realistic roadmap for settling Abkhazia. He replied that resolving the Abkhazian conflict will be very difficult, but it must be attempted. Russia is openly meddling in the conflict; even Abkhazians say Russians will not allow them to negotiate with Georgians. He also said that Russia should be more pragmatic. Also, any solution will need to begin with joint projects in the conflict zones, which could then be used as a starting point for greater growth.

Darchiashvili also noted that Georgia needs help to deal with Russia because Moscow does not take Georgia seriously. The international community, especially the United States, is the lever Georgia needs to help change Russia’s opinion. Georgians understand that while their cause may be important, it competes with many other priorities in US-Russian relations. Still, Georgia believes that the support of the United States is crucial.

A final question concerned how the U.S. government can help Georgia move forward in consolidating its democratic institutions. Nodia answered that two things are needed. The first is a reality check, as the present Georgian government is one that can easily be carried away by success. The second is to acknowledge, and encourage, Georgia’s steps in the right direction by keeping unresolved conflicts high on the agenda and by supporting Georgia’s closer relations with NATO.

*Prepared by Miranda Der Ohanian*