

## Conference Summary

## US-GEORGIA FORUM

### Georgia on the Eve of Parliamentary Elections: Consolidating Achievements, Confronting Challenges

Tuesday, 18 September 2012

The CSIS U.S.-Georgia Forum is an initiative that seeks to re-energize Georgian-U.S. relations, develop new and innovative forms of cooperation, and contribute concrete ideas in support of the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership. The panelists discussed Georgia's progress towards building enduring democratic institutions and provided an assessment of the upcoming parliamentary elections and the overall state of Georgia's democratic and economic transition. Key discussion points included:

- Importance of upcoming elections in Georgia. Despite the many obstacles still facing the country, its democratic progress is a rare example in the region.
- The October 1 elections are an important benchmark in the country's transition and the manner in which power is transferred will indicate the durability of Georgia's democratic institutions.
- Peaceful elections in Georgia could also serve as an example to other countries in the Caucasus that are struggling to implement and consolidate reforms.
- There are many obstacles that may impede the success of the elections, including the domination of the political system by two groups – the “super strong” (the ruling United National Movement in parliament) and the “super wealthy” (Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgia Dream). They can prevent progress towards open debate, free and open expression, and greater legitimacy and transparency.
- There is a prevalence of “mock election groups” in the country, which operate with the aim of discrediting the legitimate election observation organizations and destabilizing the political environment.
- A recent joint U.S. observation mission in Georgia (including members of the Department of Justice, the Department of State, and USAID) identified several areas in which the Georgian election system must improve, including: establishment of a level playing field; due process; freedom to campaign; access to a free media; and constructive engagement. Election law reform and strengthening political pluralism are crucial to Georgian political development.
- With regard to upcoming elections, protesting is an important part of the democratic process and that how the state handles it next month will be a test of the country's progress.

- The role of the U.S. in Georgia should be to 'help the Georgians help themselves.' In light of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's emphasis on establishing international partnerships as a U.S. diplomatic strategy, the U.S. and EU can engage regional players such as Turkey to support Georgia's economic development.
- The country's geography positions it to be a regional hub and energy transit corridor, which could help facilitate economic development. Due to regulations and restrictions, the role of the private sector in this endeavor will be disproportionate.
- Some attention should be paid to the diaspora communities in the region with attempts to reverse the "brain drain" and outflow of skilled human capital.
- With regard to Georgia's foreign policy and its NATO aspirations, it could provide a key advantage to the security alliance and its position straddling east and west could allow it to be a bridge between the two.
- Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia has engaged in systemic reforms and made significant improvements in its military infrastructure. Most importantly, the country has institutionalized military education and civilian control of the armed forces.
- Georgia has also implemented a National Security Review process, which is coordinated by the National Security Council with the objective of developing military strategies.
- Georgia is the only non-NATO contributor to the campaign in Afghanistan.
- The biggest threat to Georgian security comes from Russia, which has consistently sought to meddle in its internal affairs. Rising imperial sentiments held by portions of the Russian population have encouraged the government's endeavors to undermine and discredit the legitimacy of Georgia's authorities.
- Georgian security interests center on forging stronger bonds with the West and drawing closer to NATO and the EU. Georgia's democratization will lean heavily on its success in achieving these goals.
- Democratization will also promote investment and long-term development. Reforms must be implemented that promote synergies between education and government structures to improve the quality of the administration. At present, limited funding for think tanks and research centers restricts innovative policymaking.
- Regarding the upcoming elections, there is a high degree of voter interest in this year's campaign: 90% of registered voters intend to participate in the elections. Jobs and healthcare are the most important issues for voters.
- Problems surrounding campaign financing were prevalent in the early stages of the campaign, although they have since subsided.
- An interagency task force has been successful in taking steps to improve transparency.

- Observers have been on the ground in Georgia since July, both in Tbilisi and rural areas. There have been some incidents of corruption in the rural areas, but the overall assessment has thus far been positive.
- In the past, Georgian politicians have not always conceded defeat gracefully. It is hoped that the losers in this election will respect the outcomes and set a precedent for a stable transfer of power.
- Whereas during the Cold War conflicts were primarily third world proxy wars, in the modern era there is a prevalence of 'electoral wars.' This indicates an overlap between domestic and foreign politics. Foreign countries, such as Iran, have begun to invest money in elections in the Caucasus. In Georgia, the opposition forces will take aid from anyone.
- In small countries, there are few tools to ensure the transparency and legitimacy of democracy. The freedom of the media is crucial in ensuring this.
- Illegitimate or biased election monitoring groups further complicate the democratic process.
- Georgia is an important battleground in the region. The success of its democratization has broader international implications that can determine levels of regional development and interconnection. It will set the precedent for its neighbors.
- It is important that Georgians strive to reconcile the democratic process and its outcomes, and also to defend its domestic politics from external interventions.
- There has been a deterioration of important educational bonds between the Georgian elite and the U.S. Efforts should be made to strengthen these ties as this would provide Georgia with educated and competent officials.
- Compared to the standards of the EU, Georgian democracy is weak, characterized by nascent institutions, a dominant ruling party, and restricted media. However, it is a positive example among the ex-Soviet states.
- Among the distinctions from European democracies we should note:
  - *Weak tradition of democracy.* Georgian politics have always been defined by a personal element – there are not just political parties, but personalities with loyal followings and networks. Political forces have adapted messages and accepted the leadership of a wealthy man, who is not a politician. Georgian politics are made in the streets. In the past (Rose Revolution) the opposition achieved many of its demands. However, month long protests in 2009 did not result in any concession. Polls indicated that more radical candidates fared worse than conciliatory figures, which indicates a significant shift in the political climate.
  - *Lack of 'carrots' from the West:* Central and Eastern European democracies had incentives from the West to develop robust democracies and market economies through the path of EU membership. This does not exist

among former Soviet bloc states. In Romania, EU and NATO membership tipped the balance toward reforms in a corrupt state.

- *Lack of sovereignty and security:* Georgia faces a serious threat from Russia. Russia has manipulated Georgian ethnic conflicts and attempted to undermine and control domestic institutions, including the cabinet. A recent bombing campaign was organized by Moscow, which has engaged in psychological operations to make Tbilisi paranoid. Georgia will achieve security through democratization, but democratic commitments are hard to maintain in the face of a threat.
- Although much attention is being paid to the importance of elections, they may be overrated, as the real work must be done between votes. Elections are important in that they will set the stage for the 2013 presidential elections. It is likely that the incoming parliament will be more diverse.
- The nature of these elections will determine whether Georgia is ready to consolidate its democracy. However, in the absence of a solid security arrangement, the success of Georgian democracy cannot be guaranteed.