RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAM

On the Agenda

January 13, 2004

GEORGIA UNDER THE NEW REGIME

By Cory Welt
CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program

The second phase of Georgia's political transition is now complete. Having ejected Eduard Shevardnadze from power after November's flawed parliamentary elections, 36-year-old former Minister of Justice and Tbilisi City Council head Mikheil Saakashvili has been elected president of Georgia in a landslide vote. Assuming the president-elect's survival—Georgia has a legacy of political violence—he and his team now have an opportunity to exhibit their commitment to, and capacity for, solving problems that have long plagued the Georgian state.

For Georgians, it is a hopeful, if daunting, moment. They have been granted an unexpected second (or, counting Zviad Gamsakhurdia's tenure, third) chance to construct a viable state. To succeed, they must be able to count on the political and economic assistance of Western donors. At the same time, they need to rely, at a minimum, on benign non-interference from Russia.

In the end, however, Georgians must count on themselves to get the politics of the new transition right. Negotiating the multiple tasks of Georgian state-building will require considerable political wisdom and the capacity to sustain a broad public consensus in favor of future change.

Making the valiant assumption that all goes well, expectations should still not be that high. Georgia is far from becoming another Slovenia or Estonia. Nonetheless, contemporary conditions in Georgia provide an opportunity to test the argument that promoting meaningful change in this chronically underdeveloped state has simply awaited the right set of political circumstances.

The Election

The most striking feature of the January 4 presidential election was that it was held at all. The interim government accepted the constitutional requirement to hold the election within forty-five days of President Shevardnadze's resignation. The authorities agreed on a date, attracted a number of alternative (if hopeless) candidates to oppose Saakashvili, and

managed to register 1.7 million voters out of a pool of roughly 3 million (authorities chose to discard the flawed voter lists used in November's parliamentary election).

The vote itself was orderly. Earlier, a series of violent but non-lethal attacks against political and media targets raised the specter of instability. If hardline provocateurs were around on election day, however, they either lacked the capacity for action or resolved to keep their acts of sabotage in reserve.

Thanks to a regulation permitting onsite voter registration, an additional 400,000 voters registered on election day. Basing the requirement for a 50 percent turnout on the total number of newly registered voters, the Central Election Commission (CEC)—chaired by the former head of Georgia's leading election watchdog organization—reported approximately 80 percent turnout, or 1.76 million votes. Saakashvili received more than 95 percent of the vote.

Given the nature of the vote—its haste, the limited registration of voters, the pro-government majority in electoral committees, the lack of serious alternative contenders—it is difficult to consider the presidential election a true test of Georgia's nascent democratic institutions. The pro-business New Right party, bound to be one of Saakashvili's sternest opponents in the new parliament, characterized the vote best—as a referendum, not as an election.

This metaphor, however, underlines an important fact. If the election did not constitute a true exercise in public choice, the regime change it symbolized did pass an equal—if not greater—test of legitimacy. Even with the incomplete voter registration, the turnout (and the number of votes cast for Saakashvili) still constituted a majority of all possible votes.

In addition, aside from the support Saakashvili received from core voters and others willing to grant him an opportunity to lead, the election process received two highly symbolic votes of approval.

First, Saakashvili received a nod from Shevardnadze, who acknowledged voting for Saakashvili, playfully admonished the incoming president to "work more and talk less," and called upon the population to also "[come] and cast their votes."

Second, after frequent visits from Georgian and U.S. authorities, the other leading antagonist of the "rose revolution," Ajaran regional leader Aslan Abashidze, issued his reluctant approval of the vote. While instructing Ajara's hegemonic political party Revival to boycott the election, the regional dictator allowed the poll to be held in the autonomous region. The pro-Russian Abashidze justified this decision on the basis of the autonomy's interests and—remarkably—the interests of a Georgian state that by his reckoning included not just Ajara, but the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well. Declaring a need for "absolute unity," Abashidze ignored his party's boycott, demonstratively casting a vote minutes before the polls closed. According to the Ajaran leader himself, at least a quarter of the region's voters participated in the election.

And so, the successful "rose revolution" gave way to a successful referendum on regime change. Granted, if the former authorities had committed themselves to democratic parliamentary elections last year, Georgia would have embarked on a less risky path of political development and provided an environment that could have

cultivated a number of potential presidential contenders for the now aborted 2005 presidential election. But authorities did not choose this option and were subsequently toppled. Given this constraint, the snap presidential election was not a bad choice for Georgia, especially given the legitimacy with which the transition has now been endowed.

Concerns have been expressed about Saakashvili's capacity to effectively and successfully lead the country. Aside from his alleged character flaws, of little use to judge his effectiveness once in power, the parallel with the rise of the first two Georgian presidents—who came to power on the tail of major social unrest—provides some reason for concern. Might Saakashvili not forget his democratic ideals when confronted with political opposition and seek to govern, like his predecessors, by corrupting central fiat alone?

Aside from Saakashvili's age and education, a source of optimism is the lesson he inevitably draws from his predecessors' fate. Saakashvili has witnessed the destruction of two authoritarian presidents from different ends of the ideological spectrum. He has expressed a sober understanding of the challenges that face him. He can appreciate that neither other political forces nor the population will permit him to make the same bad choices as the presidents that came before.

As paradoxical as it may seem for a state often described as failed, a relatively weak Saakashvili presidency may not be such a bad thing for Georgia. The supposition that all power need be concentrated in the executive branch has not been a very effective mode of government either in Georgia or throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). If President Saakashvili is made to share power with a prime minister, an independent judiciary, and a contentious parliament, observers will not have to lament the supposed degradation of centralized power but instead welcome Georgia's unexpected transition towards a form of administration reasonable for a small state harboring European ambitions.

The Immediate Future: March 28 Parliamentary Elections

With phases one and two of Georgia's regime change complete, the third phase—parliamentary elections—will dominate the Georgian political scene in coming weeks. Given the success of the first two phases, there is no reason to think parliamentary elections will not be similarly successful, given the political commitment to holding a democratic vote. Opposition parties and some civil society representatives would have preferred elections to be delayed until late spring, in order to give opposition parties a better opportunity to build their "post-revolution" constituencies (polls indicate that the population overwhelmingly supports the new ruling bloc). To promote a more diverse legislature, the government may need to reduce the barrier to entry into parliament from 7 percent of the vote to 5 percent. It also needs to appoint a more representative Central Election Committee and ensure as accurate a process of voter registration as possible. No one expects parliamentary elections to be perfect, but the ruling team has little to lose by promoting an honest vote. Not only will they win, the government will receive international kudos for presiding over a democratic election.

The major political forces that will run in the parliamentary elections are clear. They are the same forces, outside of the now defunct pro-government bloc, that performed best in November's election. Prior to new elections, however, each of these forces will undergo their own miniature political transformations.

Primed to enter parliament, the Burjanadze-Democrats—party of interim president Nino Burjanadze and State

Minister Zurab Zhvania—must still formally announce whether they will run on their own platform or as part of a coalition led by Saakashvili's National Movement.

Two other leading parties—the Labor Party and the New Right—can also be expected to run. Each must work, however, to ensure their opposition to the "rose revolution" has not cost them too dearly—many of their previous supporters welcomed the change in power that party leaders themselves failed to back. The Labor Party has the added necessity of laying out how its agenda is distinctive (and preferable) to that of Saakashvili's National Movement. For its part, the New Right cannot be expected to successfully defend an ideology of limited government to an impoverished mass public. Still, it is in Georgia's interest to have a pro-business party, which defends its constituents' interests by legal means, in opposition.

The most uncertain position is that of Abashidze's Revival. Abashidze understands that the rules of the game have changed. He must now consider how productive the kind of egregious fraud perpetrated in Ajara in the past will be in this new context. Previous authorities encouraged Abashidze to rule Ajara with an iron hand, while Revival, through its prime position in the Georgian parliament, contributed to the stagnation of authority at the center. In a new parliament, Revival will have to formulate some kind of program—or find new allies to associate with—if it hopes to be more than a meaningless minority party.

Whether Abashidze can be convinced to permit an at all realistic vote count in Ajara remains to be seen. But while one may presume Abashidze—who resorted to his old ways of political repression soon after the vote—will resist any further modifications to his style of rule, his performance in the presidential election demonstrated that he retains the capacity to surprise. That he could be further persuaded to preside over a modestly democratizing Ajara, as long as he is assured executive control, cannot be ruled out.

The greatest fear, ironically, is that no opposition party will manage to enter parliament. While the government has agreed to allow the 75 single-mandate winners from November's election to retain their seats, many of these new deputies were members of the former pro-government bloc or independent candidates and can be expected to join forces with the new ruling team. While no one can begrudge the government its broad parliamentary mandate, it has an extraordinary responsibility to ensure that the electoral process is free and fair and that parties other than the National Movement have an opportunity to attract votes.

The Challenges Ahead

Following parliamentary elections, the Georgian government will begin to tackle major questions of political and economic reform. Collecting taxes and—even more importantly—promoting the legal, efficient, and socially productive allocation of limited state resources will constitute the central task of the new government. Observers wait to see how the much heralded fight against corruption will translate into policies other than the termination and indictment of corrupt former officials; Saakashvili has already appointed one loyal, anti-corruption crusader as prosecutor-general. He has also declared his intention to replace the position of state minister—a kind of ministerial proxy for the president—with a real prime minister. The authorities will also determine how to reform the multiple layers of Georgian regional government.

The new Georgian authorities have been outspoken in their determination to normalize relations with Russia. Before and after the election, Saakashvili, Burjanadze (who met with Russian president Vladimir Putin in

Moscow), interim foreign minister (and ex-ambassador to the United States) Tedo Japaridze, and the Georgian ambassador to Russia went beyond the usual platitudes, insisting that Georgia is committed to establishing non-antagonistic and even integrated economic and security relations with Russia. While the latter has expressed some interest in reciprocating, it is unlikely that full normalization of relations can proceed until Georgia becomes more reserved with regards to its aspirations for NATO membership. Dampening enthusiasm for this goal is not a price the Georgians are thus far willing to pay.

Assuming even limited rapprochement with Russia, Georgia ought to have an opportunity—with appropriate Western diplomatic support—to reveal what it will take to overcome the main sticking points in Georgian-Russian relations. The Russians have expressed a commitment, at least in spirit, to a previous agreement to withdraw military bases from Ajara and Armenian-populated Javakheti. They have hewn to the line, however, that it will take ten years to close the bases, due to the costs of withdrawal. Russia says it will only consider withdrawing earlier if someone else pays (including for the housing of future homeless soldiers).

Perhaps Georgia's Western donors will call this self-deprecating bluff. At the least, they can encourage the Russians to express more clearly their interest in maintaining the bases and the benefits Georgia can expect to receive in exchange for delaying their withdrawal. Then Georgians will be able to realistically assess if the costs for withdrawing the bases now are worth the gains they will incur in becoming a Russian-military free zone.

Efforts can also be made to determine Russia's view of what constitutes a just and manageable resolution of conflict with the Abkhazians and South Ossetians. The Russians have long been on record as saying that Georgia's territorial integrity is not up for debate. They should be held to this statement and asked to outline a model of Georgian statehood they deem would satisfy the aspirations and concerns of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians.

If the Russians cannot be corralled into becoming a constructive state-building partner, the Georgians should start seeking ways to encourage the Abkhazians and South Ossetians to return to Georgia on their own. The dominant Georgian perspective on conflict resolution, however, is unrealistic, at least in the short-term. A combination of diplomatic and military pressure and promises of economic gain are not going to get Abkhazians and South Ossetians to agree to the restoration of their previous autonomous status, particularly if it comes in smaller territories than before or, as in Abkhazia's case, with the return of massive numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The successful application of such levers of persuasion must await considerable development of Georgia's state strength and economic power.

An accelerated effort at resolution will require a willingness to consider an authentic federal framework for a new state that would make Ajara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia equal partners to the weighty Georgian core. Granting Abkhazia and South Ossetia the prospects of constitutionally-secured horizontal relations with Georgia might be enough to get negotiations moving forward. Equal federal units would be less fearful of housing significant Georgian minority populations. They might even countenance a redrawing of borders in order to ethnically consolidate their own regions, easing efforts at administrative control.

Preparing ties with a federal South Ossetia is the easier of the two tasks. South Ossetians lack the firm statist ideology and concern about the return of IDPs that Abkhazians possess. Even before the election, the interim Georgian government began to reduce the economic incentives for maintaining South Ossetia's current status (based on the illegal tariff-free trade that passes through its borders). Saakashvili also visited South Ossetia in a

highly symbolic, and evidently successful, campaign stunt—residents of Georgian villages and reportedly some Ossetians cast their vote in the presidential election. If President Saakashvili is prepared to consider South Ossetia a federal partner in the new Georgian state, he should soon schedule a second trip to the region to begin negotiations on unification.

Georgia has a long road ahead. No one can yet predict if the new government will succeed or fail. Still, the opportunity to help promote democracy *and* development in a CIS state—particularly on the southern flank dividing Russia from the Middle East—is too tantalizing to ignore.

Cory Welt (cwelt@csis.org) is a Visiting Fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS.