

Authoritarian Georgia: Roses are red, Georgia is blue

By [Global Research](#)

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With its two breakaway republics completely lost, its army scattered following defeat in the ‘five-day war’, its key industrial assets on sale, its President’s ties all chewed, and freedom of speech on its territory in serious question, Georgia is celebrating the five-year anniversary of its Rose Revolution.

Going West

It was a moment symbolising the departure from the last remnants of the Soviet era, embodied by previous Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze.

In November 2003 the young, charismatic, Western-educated [Mikhail Saakashvili](#) stormed the government building. With roses in their hands, he and his supporters seized power from the old establishment and ushered in the new.

In the morning we didn’t know whether we should enter the parliament or not. But it was 4pm, Shevardnadze took over the session, and in a minute the decision was taken that we shouldn’t allow an illegitimate parliament to start working,” says Kakha Kukava, who was with Saakashvili that day.

For 24 hours none of the protestors knew if they were going to become prisoners or victors. After an emergency visit by the Russian foreign minister, President Shevardnadze agreed to resign.

Georgians were quick to believe that this Western-educated man would become the Little Prince for their roses.

However, the five years that have passed since Saakashvili came to power have brought bitter disappointment for many Georgians.

Fighting opposition

Following its remarkable economy successes, Saakashvili plunged into a merciless fight with Georgia’s opposition, which eventually brought [tens of thousands onto the streets](#) in November 2007, with many urging a repeat of the 2003 events, but this time – against Saakashvili.

“Saakashvili had two or three years of carte blanche. No opposition, no media, even no international community. After these two or three years we found that it was too late

because he was keeping everything in his power. Justice, business, media – all the branches of power. After this it was too late,” says Kukava, who has now become a leader of the opposition conservative party.

Saakashvili didn't think twice before initiating a crackdown on the street protests, with riot police using tear gas, sound guns, water canons and rubber bullets [to disperse protesters](#).

The opposition television station Imedi, which broadcasted an independent view on the November 2007 events, was closed down. It was later reopened, but under new ownership it could no longer be considered an 'opposition' channel, which raises concerns over the state of free speech in Georgia

“Freedom of speech in Georgia is under serious threat today, and we're not talking only about Imedi but all television stations in Georgia,” Kukava said.

These events give today's opposition grounds to accuse the Georgian leader of plunging into the authoritarianism he once so fiercely challenged.

A year after the 2007 protest a similar rally [was held in Tbilisi](#), and one of the main demands was returning Imedi to its rightful owners, the family of tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili who died in London in February.

Chewing neckties

Saakashvili, whose habit of [chewing his neckties](#) when bored is famous already, will definitely have something to chew over when he testifies before a parliamentary commission investigating the August war on November 28.

Chairman of the Parliament David Bakradze welcomed the president's decision: “He was not obliged to bear testimony, but he showed the initiative. It was an unprecedented case in history of the Georgian parliamentary system.”

When presidents give testimonies, their resignations usually aren't far away.

There have been talks of the U.S. looking for a new president of Georgia, with ex-acting President Nino Burdzhanadze rumoured to be the main candidate.

Selling assets

Meanwhile, the five-day conflict with South Ossetia, which brought \$1 billion worth of losses, eventually took its toll on the Georgian economy. Once the greatest reformer and haven for starting business now looks set to become less independent.

With its relations with Russia gradually deteriorating following several spy scandals, Georgia shifted to Azerbaijan as its main gas supplier. In 2008 Azerbaijan is set to cater for more than 60% of Georgia's gas demand.

As a result – with the global economic crisis – Georgia is seriously endangered by the prospect of an increase in gas prices. The only resolution available for it was giving out property in exchange for discounts.

And during this month's [Baku Energy Security Summit](#) Georgia agreed to hand over the

ownership of its natural gas network to Azerbaijan.

Under the deal Azerbaijan will satisfy most of Georgia's natural gas needs in 2009-2013 at below-market prices.

In the beginning of the noughties, Russia, which owns the Tbilisi electricity network, was set to get ownership over the Georgian gas network too, but now that deal is out of question.

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