

Regime Change: Georgia's Rose Revolution Fades to Black

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“Of all manifestations power, restraint impresses men most” -
Thucydides

It seems political turmoil is becoming increasingly common in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. More than five years after the 2003 Rose Revolution, it looks like another regime change might put an end to Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency. During the last few weeks, several protests have been organized by many groups demanding that President Saakashvili tenders his resignation effective immediately. Even former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze suggested *“the country's embattled president to resign to avoid bloodshed... [because] the situation in Georgia at the moment is very tense - I would say almost catastrophic.”*[1] The heterogeneous anti-Saakashvili bloc includes the Alliance for Freedom, the Conservative Party, the Democratic Movement-United Georgia, Georgia's Way, the Industrialists Party, Movement for United Georgia, Party of People and the Alliance for Georgia, among others.

There is a precedent that must not be overlooked. In 2007, similar demonstrations took place in Georgia. Back then, Saakashvili responded by imposing emergency rule and riot police was used to prevent this wave of discontent from escalating and some pro-opposition TV stations (Imedi and Kavkasia) were, apparently, forcibly closed.[2] What both episodes have in common is that Georgian opposition members have denounced the Saakashvili government as corrupt and arbitrarily authoritarian.

Another factor has empowered Mikheil Saakashvili's domestic political adversaries. His 2008 war-mongering campaign against South Ossetia triggered a harsh reaction from Russia and ultimately ended up in a complete political and military disaster. Russian military could have invaded Tbilisi and overthrown Saakashvili but the Kremlin refrained from it because they thought that the Russian Federation could not afford the same mistakes made by the US in Iraq. Russian strategic planners probably decided it would be best to let the Saakashvili regime implode without having to actually walk into a quagmire-like occupation. That would explain why President Medvedev declared that *“President Saakashvili no longer exists in our eyes. He is a political corpse.”*[3] Nowadays, Georgian opposition accuses Saakashvili of starting a war that was doomed to be lost. [4]

Indeed, his political position has deteriorated even further. Any desire to reincorporate (peacefully or otherwise) Abkhazia and South Ossetia does not look very realistic even for the most gung-ho Georgian hardliners. Both breakaway republics have the Kremlin's strategic support and Moscow has already granted them diplomatic recognition. No wonder some Georgian moderate nationalists feel alienated by Saakashvili's reckless schemes.

Furthermore, in early May 2009 it was reported that a mutiny by personnel belonging to a tank battalion had taken place in Mukhrovani, Georgia just one day before a scheduled NATO-led military exercise on Georgian soil. So far, it is unclear whether this incident was genuine or not. If it is, it would reveal that at least certain members of the Georgian armed forces do not share Mr. Saakashvili's domestic and/or foreign policy agenda and are willing to take steps accordingly. At first, Tbilisi even blamed Russia for plotting a coup meant to unseat Saakashvili.[5] However, pro-Russian cadres are notoriously scarce among Georgia's political elite so the best Moscow can hope for is a more neutrality-minded administration in Tbilisi.

On the other hand, it would be naïve to think that Russian intelligence does not have a presence and/or assets in Georgia. It is well known that the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) operate all over the post-Soviet space and beyond. It is no secret that Russia would like Saakashvili to go one way or another. Tbilisi's bellicose antagonism toward Moscow has been responded to in kind: the Kremlin has retaliated by deporting Georgian illegal immigrants from Russia [6] and by banning Georgian wine and mineral water imports.[7] RIA Novosti indicates that remittances sent by Georgians working in Russia are over one million dollars a year, a sum which, according to the IMF, is roughly equivalent to one twelfth of Georgia's GDP.[8] The message the Russian government is trying to send is loud and clear: it is unwise to provoke the Russian bear without expecting retribution. It is unknown at this point if such message is being heard by the Georgian government or if the Saakashvili regime is even willing to pay attention to it.

There is another possibility worth scrutinizing. It cannot be ruled out that the so called "attempted coup" was staged and masterminded by someone from Saakashvili's inner circle in order to obtain a pretext to demonize the opposition by accusing them of being unpatriotic and un-Georgian. Another motive would be boosting Tbilisi's NATO membership aspirations as well as emphasizing the need to host military exercises conducted by the Atlantic alliance.[9] If this is true, then that would imply that President Saakashvili really feels cornered and that he needs desperate political tricks to remain in office.

Indeed, it would not be the first time Mikheil Saakashvili resorts to such crude methods of political manipulation and spin doctoring. It was reported that there was gunfire near the Polish and Georgian Presidents' motorcade during a visit paid by the former to the latter in late 2008. The incident occurred close to the border with South Ossetia. Researcher F. William Engdahl explains that this alleged 'attack' was orchestrated by Tbilisi in order to incriminate the Russians, which was later confirmed by Polish intelligence.[10] It must be borne in mind that Warsaw is anything but pro-Russian.

It is even possible to argue that the unstable Saakashvili regime manages to survive thanks to NATO's political, economic and diplomatic backing. Without it, his government would have possibly collapsed already. Even Financial Times journalists wonder if the Georgian President will serve his full term.[11]

Top Russian officials have voiced their concerns regarding the possibility that, hiding behind NATO, Georgia might carry out an act of provocation against Russian interests.[12] The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that "*the Georgian elite is trying to distract its population from the urgent internal problems, artificially creating idle but dangerous external stunts*".[13]

It is mistaken to assume that, if the Saakashvili government does fall, it would be automatically replaced by a pro-Russian regime. It is entirely conceivable to think that NATO regards him as an expendable asset and that, should his administration collapse, Washington has been working on a contingency plan that could be activated under those circumstances.

The Russian Federation's representative before NATO, Dmitriy Rogozin, expressed that *"Georgia's friends in NATO are strongly disillusioned with Saakashvili. He knows himself that Washington... has already made another choice. A new leader is being prepared."*[14] He specified that *"most likely it will be [former Saakashvili ally and later opposition politician] Nino Burdzhanadze."*[15]

Taking into account NATO recent muscle-flexing in Georgia and the latter's almost permanent proneness to confront its Northern neighbor, Russia is preparing to rattle its own saber as well whether Mikheil Saakashvili remains in power or not. In fact, Moscow is planning a military exercise called "Kavkaz 2009" [i.e. "Caucasus 2009"]. According to senior personnel from the Russian Defense Ministry, such maneuvers would be comparable to exercises held during the Soviet period in terms of their scale and scope.[16] Interestingly, it was also added that "Kavkaz 2009" will be based on knowledge that was acquired during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.[17] Furthermore, there are other operational strategic exercises on Moscow's agenda such as "Ladoga 2009" and "Zapad 2009" [i.e. "West 2009"]. The latter is noteworthy because the Belarusian military will be involved as well.

All of the above confirms that, as far as international relations are concerned, uncertainty is unavoidable. The Caucasus region is volatile enough already and any unexpected development there could lead to unpredictable developments whose geopolitical ramifications could engender serious and perhaps even destabilizing consequences. Georgia's Saakashvili is a textbook example that teaches that geopolitics is a game that cannot be played for long without the slightest amount of prudence. In geopolitics, there is simply no room for irresponsible gambits due to the high stakes involved. Sooner or later, that will become evident in Tbilisi.

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Notes

[1] Info - Prod Research Strategic Business Information. FORMER PRESIDENT THINK SAAKASHVILI SHOULD LEAVE. May 13, 2009.

[2] Civil Georgia Daily News Online. State of Emergency Declared in Tbilisi, as Two TV Stations Off Air. Nov 07, 2007. Available online at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16234>

[3] BBC News. Saakashvili a 'political corpse.' Sept 02, 2008. Available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7594860.stm>

- [4] Kavkasia TV (in Georgian). May 21, 2009. /BBC Monitoring/(c)
- [5] Civil Georgia Daily News Online. Officials Say Russian-Backed Mutiny Thwarted. May 05, 2009. Available online at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20851>
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- [9] Stanovaya, Tatyana. Operation 'Coup.' Polikcom. May 06, 2009. /BBC Monitoring/(c)
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- [12] Interfax News Agency. May 21, 2009. /BBC Monitoring/(c) BBC
- [13] RIA Novosti News Agency. May 16, 2009. /BBC Monitoring/(c) BBC
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- [15] Unian News Agency. Russia NATO envoy says U.S. planning to replace Georgian leader. Nov 28, 2008. Available online at <http://www.unian.net/eng/news/news-287175.html>
- [16] Zvezda TV. May 19, 2009. /BBC Monitoring/(c) BBC
- [17] Ibid.

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