

GEORGIA'S “ROSE REVOLUTION”



**A Report Prepared by the Staff of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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GEORGIA'S "ROSE REVOLUTION"

In summer and fall 2003, Georgians were preparing for important parliamentary elections scheduled for that November. Apart from determining the composition of the legislature, the election was widely seen as a bellwether for the 2005 presidential election, when President Eduard Shevardnadze would no longer be eligible to run for office. While more distant analysts looked forward to the election as a particularly interesting post-Soviet political transition, Georgians were hoping a new president could drag the country out of stagnation.

After returning to his homeland in 1992, Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, had helped restore stability to a country wracked by chaos and lawlessness. He fostered the establishment of political parties and state institutions and promoted a cadre of impressive young politicians. But by the late 1990s, Shevardnadze's pluses were increasingly vanishing. Under his leadership, Georgia had degenerated into what many viewed as a failed state, plagued by rampant corruption, unable to provide basic services and incapable of controlling its borders. The separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been factually independent since 1993. Ajara, an ethnically Georgian region on the Black Sea coast, was ruled by a defiant local boss, Aslan Abashidze, who refused to pay taxes to the national budget and skimmed millions from customs and contraband. Abashidze also cultivated cozy ties with Russia which maintained a military base in his fiefdom.

Georgia's relations with its northern neighbor were prickly at best—partly because of Georgia's pro-Western orientation and strategic position along the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, partly because many Russian officials resented Shevardnadze for his role in the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Moscow, which had backed the Abkhaz and South Ossetians in their conflicts with Georgia, accused Tbilisi of not controlling its border with Chechnya, allowing Chechen fighters to cross back and forth. Russian officials warned of incursions into Georgian territory and Russia's armed forces occasionally acted on these threats. Moscow also imposed a discriminatory visa regime with Georgia, from which Abkhazia and South Ossetia were exempted. In both regions, moreover, Russia handed out Russian citizenship, while buying up the regions' most attractive assets.

By 2002, therefore, Shevardnadze's position was increasingly problematic. Georgia's prospects of restoring its shattered unity, which required Russian neutrality if not active cooperation, seemed bleak. At home, Shevardnadze's former reformist allies and protégés accused him of tolerating corruption. Former Justice Minister Mikheil Saakashvili, former Parliament Speaker Zurab Zhvania, and current Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze aligned against Shevardnadze in a fractious opposition bloc.

The United States, for its part, continued to support the Government of Georgia but Washington's patience with Shevardnadze's perpetual balancing act among Georgia's corrupt and reformist political forces was quickly coming to an end. To emphasize the importance of holding of a free and fair parliamentary election in November, President Bush during the summer sent former Secretary of State James Baker as his personal envoy to Tbilisi. His goal was to facilitate agreement between Georgia's Government and the opposition over the most contentious issues, especially the composition of the Central Election Commission. Despite much hoopla, however, the "Baker Plan" was not fully implemented by Tbilisi.

Against that backdrop, Georgia's November 2003 parliamentary election turned out far more interesting than anyone had expected. As widely anticipated, given the record of electoral processes throughout the region, the contest was rigged. But Georgians did something unprecedented in the former USSR region: a group of opposition leaders mounted a popular campaign to resist the falsification of an election. In the end, they not only succeeded, they wound up toppling a government and a head of state.

THE NOVEMBER 2003 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Pro-Shevardnadze forces united in the bloc "For a New Georgia." Other leading contenders, apart from Aslan Abashidze's Revival Party, included: Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement; the Burjanadze-Democrats, uniting supporters of Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania; the New Rights; and Industry Will Save Georgia.

Voting day passed without violence but the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concluded that the elections "fell short of a number of OSCE commitments," subsequently adding charges of "widespread and systematic fraud." Immediately after the balloting, the charismatic Saakashvili, along with Zhvania and Burjanadze, charged the authorities with falsification and mobilized supporters into the streets. For several tense weeks, they thronged Tbilisi's main square. Rustavi-2, Georgia's independent TV station, broadcast continuous newscasts on the developing crisis, not concealing its sympathy for the demonstrators. Negotiations between Shevardnadze and the opposition triumvirate, which demanded new elections and then, egged on by Saakashvili, increasingly shifted to calling for Shevardnadze's resignation, failed to resolve the standoff. U.S. and Russian mediators were closely involved in the talks, hoping to find a solution.

When the Central Election Commission announced after substantial delay (November 20) results that gave Saakashvili's National Movement only 18 percent of the vote, he, Zhvania and Burjanadze decided matters had come to a head. On November 22, when Shevardnadze, whose support was visibly melting away, tried to seat the newly elected parliament, Saakashvili and his backers entered the legislature bearing roses and demanded that Shevardnadze step down. The chastened president, already incapable of resistance, was hustled away by bodyguards.

Eduard Shevardnadze's career was over, his era ending with him. His official resignation the next day was a formality.

In accordance with constitutional norms governing the resignation of the head of state, Speaker Nino Burjanadze became Acting President. She scheduled snap presidential elections for January 4, 2004.

THE JANUARY 4, 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

January's election was less a contest among candidates than a coronation. Though five other politicians threw their hat into the ring, Saakashvili's victory was certain. His leadership of the peaceful revolution had completely transformed Georgian politics: politicians allied with Shevardnadze's For a New Georgia had either left the scene or were irrelevant; opposition parties like the New Rights or Industry Will Save Georgia, which did not join Saakashvili's bandwagon, lost much of their popular support.

The only questions were turnout—Saakashvili feared the certainty of his victory might keep voters from participating—and the scope of his landslide. In the end, over 82 percent of voters cast ballots with Saakashvili's own tally reaching 96 percent. The figure surely reflected some inflation by local officials who

did what they have done for years—curry favor with the powers that be. But the triumphant hero of the Rose Revolution was undeniably popular. In the precinct in Mtskheta (about 25 minutes' drive from Tbilisi) where Helsinki Commission staff observed the vote count on January 4, almost all of the over 750 ballots cast—which were shown to observers—were for Saakashvili. Handwritten notes next to his name on two ballots gave some insight into voters' feelings: one proudly read “Gamarjos” [“Long Live!”], while the other plaintively read “help.”

The OSCE/ODHIR assessment noted some shortcomings, such as the domination of election commissions by the new authorities, and inaccurate voter lists, but concluded that the election “demonstrated notable progress over previous elections and in several respects brought the country closer to meeting OSCE commitments.” Washington echoed that view; in a strong gesture of U.S. support for Georgia and Saakashvili personally, Secretary of State Colin Powell attended his January 25 inauguration. Still, OSCE observers looked forward to parliamentary elections as a better test of the new Georgian Government's commitment to fair elections, when circumstances offered a more pluralistic environment.

THE MARCH 28, 2004 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

For reasons that remain controversial and unclear (the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's one-word judgment was “inexplicable”), Georgia's Supreme Court decided on November 25 to hold a repeat election only for parliament's 150 party-line seats, leaving in effect the results of the November 2 single-mandate voting (85 seats). Various Georgian opposition leaders, such as the New Rights' David Gamkrelidze, called for postponing the election for several months but Burjanadze on January 9 set the date for March 28. Also, the threshold for parliamentary representation in proportional balloting was left at seven percent, despite pleas from opposition parties and the Council of Europe to lower it.

Saakashvili and his team argued that a higher threshold would force Georgia's numerous small parties to consolidate instead of hoping to perpetuate their marginal political existence. Critics countered that Saakashvili and Zhvania were seeking to monopolize control of parliament. Saakashvili did not help his cause by declaring a few days before the election that he did not really see the need for opposition among legislators, considering the urgency of major reforms for Georgia.

Ultimately, 16 parties and blocs contested the elections, offering voters a wide choice—except for Ajaria, where Abashidze's grip on the political process remained in effect. But, before the election, Saakashvili's National Movement united with the Burjanadze Democrats, guaranteeing their sweep. The only question was whether any other party or bloc would exceed the seven percent threshold. On April 1, the Central Election Commission announced that only the New Rights had done so. In the village of Chardaki, where Helsinki Commission staff observed the vote count, the results mirrored countrywide trends, with the National Movement far ahead of other contenders.

The OSCE/ODIHR verdict on the process was positive. The election “demonstrated commendable progress in relation to previous elections. The Georgian authorities have seized the opportunity, since the 4 January presidential election, to further bring Georgia's election process in closer alignment with European standards for democratic elections, including OSCE commitments and Council of Europe standards.” As in January, however, the OSCE warned that “the consolidation of the democratic election process will only be fully tested in a more competitive environment, once a genuine level of political pluralism is reestab-

lished.” Washington, for its part, applauded Tbilisi, when the State Department spokesman said on March 29: “We are pleased to see the steady progress that the Georgian Government appears to have made in administering free elections.”

The election results allowed Saakashvili to consolidate his November-January victory and forcefully demonstrate his dominance of Georgia’s political scene. When the new parliament convened in late April, the National Movement–Burjanadze Democrats controlled 153 of 235 seats. Nino Burjanadze, Saakashvili’s ally, was elected Speaker. They have maintained a working relationship, even though Burjanadze felt her supporters had been slighted in the compilation of the unified party list.

Saakashvili now has a supportive legislature to help implement his proposed reforms. If he is not successful, or less successful than he hopes, he will not be able to blame obstructionist lawmakers.

CONCLUSIONS

There were four important elections in the Caucasus in 2003: presidential (February-March) and parliamentary (May) in Armenia; presidential (October) in Azerbaijan; and parliamentary (November) in Georgia. All were fraudulent to varying degrees but the response of opposition leaders and society in the three neighboring states differed significantly. In Armenia, they protested the official results but shrank from confrontation with the state. In Azerbaijan, clashes broke out on election day between police and protesters who claimed vote rigging but the authorities easily crushed the demonstration; they then extended their crackdown countrywide, removing the opposition—at least for the time being—as a player in national politics. In Georgia, however, key opposition figures remained united and rallied public support against an unpopular government. For the first time in the former USSR, public protest succeeded in overturning the results of a rigged election and, ultimately, bringing down a head of state.

The heroes of the revolution had forecast the events. At a talk in Washington at the National Democratic Institute in February 2003, Saakashvili said that if the authorities tried to steal the election, voters would rise up and oust them. But opposition leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan had made similar forecasts about events in their own countries. Why was Georgia able to do what its neighbors could not? The reasons help explain what transpired in Georgia and elucidate why similar events elsewhere are unlikely.

Why Georgia?

First, a “revolution” was possible in Georgia because during Eduard Shevardnadze’s tenure, opposition leaders, parties and society had developed leeway for action which did not exist elsewhere in the Caucasus, not to speak of Central Asia. Since the late 1980s, many parties and NGOs had emerged, as had relatively free media. Their freedom of maneuver and action, which translated into effective political influence, reflected Shevardnadze’s own relatively liberal attitudes, the weakness of the Georgian state—i.e., its inability to control and co-opt competing center of power and authority—and Georgians’ unruly national character.

Moreover, international NGOs were deeply involved in Georgian events. Much press and analytical attention has been focused on the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation, which funded critically important groups like Georgia’s Liberty Institute, its leading human rights organization. Some Liberty Institute associates traveled to Serbia to study how Slobodan Milosevic had been ousted. Closely allied with

the Liberty Institute was the student movement *Kmara* [“Enough”], which mobilized opposition to vote fraud countrywide. These groups, urged on by opposition politicians, were determined not to let Shevardnadze and Georgia’s entrenched political groups steal the election.

Second, the Georgian state, crippled by corruption, was extremely weak. The worst consequence of this weakness was that criminals and crooked officials did not worry about the possible penalties of breaking the law. But this weakness ultimately made possible November’s Rose Revolution by dissipating the state’s ability to resist better organized players. True, international organizations and foreign capitals were urging a peaceful resolution of the showdown and warning Shevardnadze—whom everyone expected to remain in office until 2005—that resorting to violence would end in disaster. But by November 2003, Shevardnadze could no longer command the state’s coercive apparatus; in the end, nobody was willing to act against crowds peacefully calling, first, for new elections and then for his resignation.

Third, Georgia’s key opposition leaders were united. Unlike counterparts in Armenia and Azerbaijan, “Misha” Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze were able to overcome their longstanding differences and competing ambitions to act together. While the latter two may have—as reported—trailed the former in his conviction that Shevardnadze had to go, they overcame their doubts and hung together until the final triumph. Saakashvili, for his part, has continued to collaborate with them after his inauguration and often restates his determination to keep doing so.

Fourth, Georgia had Rustavi-2 TV, which powerfully shaped public opinion. In fact, the events in Georgia last November have demonstrated convincingly the power of independent—i.e., not state-controlled—television in former Soviet republics. It was a failed attempt by the state to pressure Rustavi-2 in November 2001 that produced the biggest public protest in Georgia before November 2003. At that time, thousands of demonstrators not only forced Shevardnadze to back down, he was compelled to dismiss his entire government.

Not for nothing has the ruling elite in other former Soviet states contrived so consistently to keep TV in its own hands. If there is any downside to the influence Rustavi-2 wielded in Georgia, it is the strengthened conviction of repressive rulers elsewhere to prevent at all costs the emergence of analogous TV stations.

Fifth, economic conditions in Georgia had been deteriorating for years, with no respite in sight. Over the last few years, residents of Baku and Yerevan have told Helsinki Commission staff that things were getting better, even if slightly, but in Tbilisi conditions had fallen steadily. A seemingly endless stream of winters without heat or electricity and little or no prospect of improvement sapped support for Shevardnadze. Desperate Georgians had concluded by November 2003 that almost anything was better than what they had, despite the uncertainties.

Democratization

Within Georgia, the Rose Revolution greatly accelerated the country’s scheduled political processes, resolving several fundamental problems and opening the door to new opportunities. In one stroke, a long-anticipated political succession that was expected to feature a long winnowing process, tough negotiations and possibly violence among contending groups was eclipsed by a sustained manifestation of popular will.

The Rose Revolution has had a major impact on the other countries of the former Soviet Union. First of all, it was an inspiring victory for democracy and even peaceful conflict resolution. While ruling elites have stolen elections throughout the former Soviet space, in Georgia a group of opposition leaders managed to unite and unify behind themselves large enough numbers of voters to thwart an attempted theft of the vote. No less important, they did so peacefully, settling the dispute between state and society without bloodshed. The Georgian events have created an important precedent and elsewhere have inspired frustrated opposition activists who followed Georgian events closely.

By the same token, Saakashvili's historic victory has stunned the leaders of the region, who rightly see in him the embodiment of their worst nightmare: a charismatic opposition leader who headed a popular movement against a corrupt, repressive state apparatus and succeeded in ousting the incumbent. Not surprisingly, they have acted to contain the Georgian "contagion."

Uzbek authorities, for example, moved in April to close down the Soros Foundation's office in Tashkent. Other Central Asian rulers, who seem determined to remain in office indefinitely, dismissed Georgia's Rose Revolution as unique to that country and irrelevant to their own. Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev, for example, criticized Shevardnadze for failing to improve living standards which, he claimed, could not be said about Kazakhstan.

Closer to home, Georgia's example has produced echoes but no imitators. In Armenia, for instance, President Robert Kocharian has easily outmaneuvered the opposition bloc which has organized demonstrations demanding a vote of confidence in him. He openly attributes the opposition's motivation to the Georgian events, but warns them, "Armenia is not Georgia." The economic situation is improving, he maintains, and the Armenian state is well capable of dealing with discontented politicians and their backers. So far, nothing has proved him wrong.

Moscow, for its part, has been largely ambivalent about Georgia's Rose Revolution. Russian officials, from President Vladimir Putin on down, had made no secret of their antipathy to Eduard Shevardnadze. When Shevardnadze resigned, Putin stressed that the Georgian leader—apart from failing to improve living standards—had presided over ruinous relations with Russia. On the other hand, Shevardnadze was a known quantity whereas the young, impulsive Saakashvili was capable of launching unexpected initiatives. Saakashvili traveled to Moscow in February where he reportedly had a good meeting with Putin. Clearly, the atmospherics of Russo-Georgian relations have improved. Whether that translates to substantive improvements on critical issues, especially the removal of military bases, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is another matter.

The Saakashvili Presidency

Since his January victory, Saakashvili has moved to realize his vision for Georgia, which involves institutionalizing anticorruption measures and seeking to reunite South Ossetia and Abkhazia by reordering Georgia's relations with Russia. His first order of business, however, was to square accounts with his key allies and to restructure the Georgian Government.

On February 6, parliament adopted Saakashvili's proposed constitutional amendments, which *inter alia* strengthened the position of the executive vis-à-vis the legislature by allowing Georgia's president to dissolve parliament. The amendments also created the position of prime minister. As agreed beforehand and widely expected, Saakashvili gave the post to Zurab Zhvania, who appointed a government of young allies and technocrats.

The amendments drew criticism from Georgian opposition leaders and NGOs, including the Liberty Institute, which was so closely linked to Saakashvili. Most of the focus centered on the enhanced executive authority; other commentators charged the authorities with ignoring the legal requirement of a one-month public debate before changing the constitution. The Council of Europe and the European Parliament also echoed these concerns.

In his first months in office, Saakashvili has struck at corruption by arresting officials and high-profile individuals. The most prominent among the latter is Shevardnadze's son-in-law who eventually bought his way out of prison for a \$15 million "donation" to the state. But Saakashvili has also tried to introduce the practice of appointing to official positions people with qualifications, as opposed to connections. He has consistently asserted in public that anyone who breaks the law will be brought to book, regardless of important relatives. While corruption is deeply entrenched in Georgia, the new president has at least begun to move against it.

Saakashvili has also struck a blow for criminal accountability. In March—after receiving a letter from several Members of the U.S. Congress—he authorized the arrest of Basil Mkalavishvili, a defrocked Orthodox priest who since 1999 had organized mob attacks against religious minorities, especially Jehovah's Witnesses. Shevardnadze, though frequently intoning against religious intolerance and promising to end the violence, had never been able or willing to arrest the prime instigators.

Nothing if not lucky, President Saakashvili has continued his streak in Ajaria. Though he stated in his inaugural address that reuniting Georgia's territory was his overriding goal, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose population is not Georgian by ethnicity and where Russia has a vested interest in sustaining the status quo, will not so easily be restored to the fold. Saakashvili had better prospects in Ajaria, where Abashidze—appalled at the ousting of the status-quo Shevardnadze and Saakashvili's rise to prominence—refused to allow January's election to take place on "his" territory: only on December 29 did he agree, under strong pressure from Tbilisi and Washington. But, he lifted only for the election the State of Emergency he had declared and reimposed it on January 7.

Once in power, Saakashvili and his NGO allies shifted their attention south. Liberty Institute representatives told Helsinki Commission staff in early April that Abashidze would be gone by summer. They explained that networks of activists were already at work in the region, seeking to replicate a November-style campaign of mobilizing a broad-based movement against an unpopular leader.

In fact, these predictions came true sooner than expected. Throughout February-March, Abashidze and Saakashvili traded barbs and threats. Meanwhile, anti-Abashidze groups tried to organize, risking arrests and beatings by Abashidze's goons. On March 14, he refused to let Georgia's new president enter Ajaria to campaign for the parliamentary election. Tbilisi thereupon imposed economic sanctions on Ajaria,

closing off the port of Batumi. The blockade was lifted after a March 18 meeting between the two men, but it was clear that a decisive showdown was in the offing. Many Georgians and international observers were alarmed at the prospect of violence; U.S. and Russian intermediaries sought to broker a deal.

But Abashidze's position steadily weakened and finally he made a huge blunder on May 2 by blowing up the bridges linking Ajara to the rest of Georgia. His lieutenants, some of whom had already signaled their willingness to come over to Saakashvili's side, now abandoned him as the numbers of demonstrators ballooned. Abashidze's Russian backers saw the game was up and persuaded—or ordered?—him to leave. On May 6, Aslan Abashidze left for Moscow in disgrace on the airplane of Russian Security Council chief Igor Ivanov.

Saakashvili's second successful "Rose Revolution" was a huge victory for himself and for Georgia. Avoiding a bloody confrontation between the central Georgian Government and Abashidze's forces, Tbilisi reestablished its control over Ajara and got rid of a corrupt local boss, demonstrating the unity between Ajarian Georgians and their compatriots in the rest of the country. Revenue from Ajara's port of Batumi and customs should assist the struggling Georgian economy. Perhaps most importantly, Saakashvili's triumph bolstered Georgians' hope and confidence.

For the most part, especially considering how recently he came to power, Saakashvili—the youngest president in Europe—has already scored impressive victories: resolving the succession problem, moving against corruption, restoring respect for the state and its representatives, and beginning to consolidate Tbilisi's control of the country's territories. Still, the low-hanging fruit has already been picked. Future victories will not be as easy, quick or as bloodless.

With respect to reintegrating Georgia's territory, South Ossetia is next on the agenda. Like Aslan Abashidze, leaders in Tskhinvali warn that any attempt to try a Rose Revolution will lead to violence; as with Ajara, Russian politicians echo these warnings. Official Ossetians maintain that their independence is permanent and have declared their desire to unite with North Ossetia across the border inside the Russian Federation. Georgian officials offer assurances that no force will be used, but it is clear that Tbilisi intends to step up the pressure on South Ossetia's leaders by appealing over their heads to the populace. Whether this tactic will work again remains to be seen.

Perhaps most important, Georgia's economy must develop, creating jobs and attracting foreign investment. Making convincing progress against corruption is critical to both tasks. Saakashvili understands that a politician with approval ratings in the eighties can only go down from there; if he wants to retain his standing, he will have to improve living standards for Georgians. To that end, Saakashvili plans to entice Russian business interests, though Tbilisi will have to guard against allowing Moscow, either through state control or private interests, to take over Georgia's strategic assets.

At the same time, though Saakashvili's popularity is acknowledged, as are his accomplishments, he has drawn criticism as well. Some human rights NGOs have warned that he is presiding over what they see as a worrisome expansion of presidential authority. In general, Saakashvili has elicited concern over the years for authoritarian tendencies; his detractors today accuse him of trying to instill not just respect for the state, but fear. Various Georgians—including those by no means hostile to their new president—told Helsinki Commission staff of their alarm about televised images of masked, armed men arresting alleged

criminals, whom Saakashvili derided on TV as crooks or worse. Even some who welcomed the arrest of Basil Mkalavishvili complained about the manner in which it was done: armed police burst into the church where he was holed up, clashing with his supporters, among whom were included elderly women. Leaders of opposition parties, for their part, have accused Saakashvili of orchestrating his election victories by seizing control of election commissions and ballot stuffing.

The last grievance clearly reflects sour grapes but other complaints are serious and deserve attention. Developing democracy in post-Soviet republics, it has now become clear over the last 12 years, will be a long, drawn-out process, with no guarantee of success in many of them. Authoritarian traditions remain strong even among the best educated, most Western-oriented leaders, with little or no personal involvement in the Communist Party apparatus or stake in that tradition of governing. “Misha” Saakashvili, though a Western-trained lawyer, is not immune to such temptations of power. And, he must also work to restore Georgia’s state—establishing its capabilities and credibility as well as enhancing its effectiveness. In trying to do so, and even with the best intentions, he may indeed overreach at times. Precisely for this reason, it is important that Georgian society and friends in foreign capitals continue to track the situation closely and, when needed, offer constructive criticism.

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