

Georgian Politics since the August 2008 War

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Abstract: Georgian politics since late 2007 has attracted interest mainly because of its highly polarized political climate. The leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili, widely heralded as a beacon of democracy in the post-Soviet space following the peaceful Rose Revolution of 2003, is pitted against an array of determined opposition forces that seek his removal and accuse his government of authoritarian tendencies. Yet a closer study of Georgian politics since the August 2008 Russian invasion suggests that the polarization of its politics is not reflected in society, which overwhelmingly supports conciliation and dialogue rather than another round of revolutionary change. By mid-2009, the overheated Georgian political scene showed signs of adapting to this reality.

Keywords: Georgian political development, Rose Revolution, Russia-Georgia War

Few events affect a society as war does. Likewise, war can alter a country's political landscape, and an unsuccessful war can be irreparably damaging to a political leader. It is therefore natural to assume that the controversial and (for Georgia) devastating war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 would have important implications for the political balances of such a young and immature democracy as Georgia. In particular, in a political system as personality-focused as Georgia, one could logically conclude that the country's controversial head of state, Mikheil Saakashvili, would fare badly from this event. A considerable portion of world opinion concluded that Saakashvili at best stumbled into the war, and several high-ranking Saakashvili associates moved into opposition; both of these occurrences tend to strengthen such an argument. However, this interpretation is only partially true in Georgia, where public opinion polls from 2008 and 2009 do not fully support such a conclusion. Public trust in the government markedly increased between October 2007 and November 2008, after which it decreased only gradually. Georgian politics are intensely polarized, with a deadlock between a government strong enough to stay in power and an opposition unable to muster enough public support to unseat the government or force new elections but capable of disrupting the

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government's work. However, Georgia's polarization does not appear to be reflected in public opinion, which appears much more interested in dialogue among political leaders and economic development. Georgia presents a complex political situation that does not lend itself to easy interpretation.

From Roses to Guns

During 1993–97, Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze succeeded in stabilizing the country following the debilitating first years of independence, during which Georgia came close to disintegration, experiencing two ethnic separatist conflicts with foreign meddling and two brief civil wars.¹ However, Shevardnadze failed to build a modern, functioning state. Instead, the Georgian government became notoriously corrupt and inefficient. As Vladimer Papava writes, from 1999, Shevardnadze "began disregarding common sense and expert advice," and the country lagged seriously, in terms of both governance and economy, unable to meet even the requirements for IMF loans.² Widespread corruption is endemic to the former Soviet Union, but the Georgian variant under Shevardnadze was more chaotic and unregulated—not systematic and hierarchical—implying that it posed a much greater threat to economic development than the forms of corruption prevalent in Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan. That does not mean that high-level Georgian officials (and members of Shevardnadze's family) did not engage in corruption, but there was no orderly, predictable system of corruption, meaning that firms could not operate with any confidence in Georgia.

Moreover, the Georgian government stood out in comparison to other post-Soviet countries (excluding Tajikistan and perhaps Kyrgyzstan) in its failure to assert control over either the country's bureaucracy or territory, preventing the government's authority from extending much beyond Tbilisi. Leaving aside the secessionist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the state was practically absent in areas like Adjara, the Armenian-populated Javakheti, or the mountainous areas near the Russian border. The most vivid illustration was the Pankisi Gorge in northern Georgia, which the country's corrupt security and interior ministers effectively allowed to become a criminal haven until 2001.³ The government's weakness, coupled with Shevardnadze's liberal inclinations, also meant an inability and a degree of unwillingness to exert repression. That, in turn, allowed Georgian society to freely debate the shortcomings of the government—an essential factor in paving the way for the Rose Revolution, which occurred following the Shevardnadze government's blatant attempt to falsify a parliamentary election.⁴

The Rose Revolution brought in a new generation of politicians; its leaders had been the guard of "young reformers" trying to work within the Shevardnadze system's framework who had ultimately moved into opposition. The Rose Revolution and its immediate aftermath saw immense optimism in Georgian politics. In the January 2004 snap presidential election, which largely constituted a referendum on the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili won a 96 percent landslide victory—a result signifying immense public support in favor of what was seen as generational change in Georgian politics, a change that would finally do away with the ills of the painful 1990s. The fact that most heavyweight politicians in what was termed the "young reformer" camp took part in the revolution either as members of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) or as close allies, such as Nino Burjanadze or Zurab Zhvania, also signaled a strong political consensus on the need for reform and political change. Exceptions were the New Rights Party, the Industrialist Party,

and the Labor Party, all of whom opposed what they deemed the unconstitutional changes in government that the revolution brought about, although they remained mild in their criticism. Although the Georgian Republican Party and Conservative Party of Georgia left the coalition shortly after the consolidation of the new leadership, opposition in Georgian politics was extremely marginal at the outset of the revolution.

The new government set out with a strongly, some might say ruthlessly, reform-oriented political agenda aimed at economic liberalization, anticorruption, and institution building—the very thorough reform of Georgia’s police being perhaps the most telling example—and most prominently the reestablishment of territorial integrity. The latter rapidly paid off through the reestablishment of government control over the Adjara region, which previously enjoyed unregulated autonomy under local strongman Aslan Abashidze.

The struggle against corruption is perhaps the most obvious and well-known success of the Saakashvili government. Within two years, petty corruption was effectively eliminated in Georgia. Opinion polls show that since 2005–6, the number of Georgians reporting having been solicited for a bribe is consistently less than 3 percent. In 2008, only 2.1 percent had been solicited for a bribe.⁵ Of course, rumors and speculations of corruption in Georgia’s higher echelons have continued to exist, and Saakashvili himself has acknowledged corrupt practices on the part of former government officials. However, Georgian society is no longer permeated by corruption—a dramatic change compared to the situation only half a decade ago and one that carries far-reaching consequences for the country’s political and economic development.

Although the measures employed to fight corruption enjoyed strong public support in Georgia, the new regime also made enemies among forces that had benefited under Shevardnadze’s regime at an early stage. The new government had several high-level officials arrested and offered them a “plea bargain” option: repay the money they were accused of stealing from the state for their freedom, although the evidence was occasionally scant.⁶ This policy raised eyebrows in the West, as it showed less than full respect for due process,⁷ but it was certainly effective in ending the climate of impunity that had reigned in Georgia. The processes under the Shevardnadze regime are best characterized as a form of state capture; Western policy and academic circles have yet to devise ways to reverse state capture through means that would conform to due process requirements.⁸ Without these moves against high-level corruption, Saakashvili’s measures to halt low-level corruption would probably not have been met with the same level of public acceptance. Saakashvili moved against the notoriously corrupt traffic police, gradually reforming Georgia’s police force into a more professional one. Other subtle but important measures included reforming the university admissions system, which will for the first time create a generation of Georgian intellectuals and leaders beholden to nothing but their merit for entry into a university.

The government also made several controversial changes to the constitution, significantly strengthening presidential powers in relation to the parliament and the judiciary; these measures were intended to provide room to implement the government’s extremely ambitious reform agenda. However, as was pointed out by both analysts and opposition politicians, these reforms also effectively removed many of the checks and balances in the political system and allowed for a rule by presidential decree rather than passing legislation through a parliamentary process.⁹ Changes were also made to the electoral system, most controversially in March 2008, just ahead of the May parliamentary elections.¹⁰ Following

the collapse of the government's negotiations with the opposition regarding the electoral system, the number of single mandate constituencies was increased from fifty to seventy-five, while the members of parliament elected on a proportional system were reduced from 100 to 75, effectively serving to reinforce the dominance of the UNM in parliament, as the governing party had distinctive advantages in single-mandate constituencies, particularly in the countryside.¹¹ This change left very little room for influence over the legislative process by opposition parties and reduced the chances of smaller parties gaining proportional representation in parliament.¹²

Up until the November 2007 demonstrations and riots, the new leadership also displayed what could best be described as arrogance in the face of political opponents, avoiding public debates on the reforms they were carrying out and failing to maintain active communication with society on the envisioned benefits of the harsh restructuring they advocated. Adding to this, the government's rapid and far-reaching reforms involved a substantial trimming of the state apparatus, as thousands of people lost their jobs and positions, creating a large number of enemies (mainly from among the Soviet-era bureaucracy and intelligentsia). Saakashvili's disbandment of Soviet-era intelligentsia associations exacerbated this trend, which was particularly pronounced in Tbilisi. It is no surprise that Saakashvili consistently polls significantly below his national average in the capital city, which is the bastion of the political opposition.

The elite body running Georgia was revolutionary in the true sense of the term. It purposefully broke with accepted political norms, confident in its ability to transform the country over a very short period of time. However, it soon found that its twin aims of democratization and state-building were not necessarily complementary; the road to becoming a functioning state, itself necessary for the long-term building of democracy, is not necessarily easily accomplished through democratic means. Saakashvili's personal admiration for Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey, is symptomatic of this: Ataturk faced similar conditions, although on a much larger scale. Effectively, Georgia's new leaders found that to build the state, they had to centralize power and exert stronger control over society and moribund state institutions. However, once power is centralized, it is seldom voluntarily decreased or relinquished.

Although Saakashvili's reforms thoroughly transformed Georgia, several problems were apparent by 2007. Aside from the neoliberal economic policies that caused considerable short-term hardships, the slow reform of the judiciary stood out as a major problem (the judiciary consistently ranks as the public's least trusted institution). Likewise, the lag of reform in the electoral code and the mixed situation regarding media freedom were increasingly obvious to foreign observers. Georgia is among the few post-Soviet states where opposition-controlled television stations have been allowed by authorities. Nevertheless, the government's intervention into the Imedi TV station complicated this picture. The formerly oppositional channel was sold to Ras-al-Khaimah Investment Authority in February 2009, though the deal was shrouded in controversy, as it was challenged by the family of former owner Badri Patarkatsishvili. Smaller oppositional TV stations exist, such as Maestro TV, but faced difficulties expanding their coverage area beyond Tbilisi.¹³ Perhaps most important, Georgian politics remained overly influenced by informal networks rather than formal institutions. An informal group involving the president's close confidants, not the cabinet of ministers, was responsible for making key decisions. Aside from the few ministers (primarily Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili) who were part

of this “kitchen cabinet,” government ministers became implementers rather than decisionmakers. Such a process lacked institutional basis and accountability and inevitably aroused public suspicion.

During 2005–6, the societal consensus in support of the Rose Revolution had gradually begun to wither. This decline occurred in part because the revolution’s enthusiastic leaders had raised expectations in society to levels that could not possibly be satisfied. Moreover, the hitherto rather silent oppositional forces began to mobilize and feed off growing popular disaffection.¹⁴ Moreover, a stream of former members of Saakashvili’s entourage, including ministers who felt disregarded or who were fired, joined the opposition’s ranks.¹⁵ Saakashvili’s personnel policies sometimes resembled a game of musical chairs in several ministries, including in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where six ministers have held office since the revolution.¹⁶ Many were dismissed in a summary fashion, generating ill will that contributed to their joining the opposition. Many Saakashvili allies who turned into opponents often did so because of personal differences, rather than disagreements over policy, which helps explain the intense personal hatred that appears to characterize the politics of opposition leaders such as Giorgi Khaindrava, a former minister for conflict resolution; Salome Zourabichvili, a former foreign minister; and Burjanadze, a former speaker of parliament and two-time acting president. The moderate former UN ambassador Irakli Alasania, who parted ways with Saakashvili in December 2008, stands out as the exception that proves the rule.¹⁷

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Ten opposition parties formed a coalition in the summer of 2007. This coalition united a quite diverse range of political actors, including former Saakashvili allies, such as Zourabichvili and Khaindrava; radical opposition politicians, such as Shalva Natelashvili and Koba Davitashvili; and moderate and liberal opposition politicians, such as David Usupashvili and his Republican Party. The coalition embarked on a set of protest actions in various locations throughout Georgia over the summer, although these organized rallies failed to draw large crowds. The coalition argued that the government failed to deliver on the promises made after the revolution and that Saakashvili’s presidency had become increasingly authoritarian, also complaining about alleged high-level corruption and seizures of private property, and demanding the release of alleged political prisoners.

In September of the same year, police arrested the recently discharged defense minister, Irakli Okruashvili, on charges of corruption, sparking intensified activity in the opposition ranks. Shortly before his arrest, Okruashvili had gone public with serious allegations against Saakashvili, including accusing the president of involvement in the February 2005 death of Zurab Zhvania, but failed to produce any evidence to support his claims. The opposition saw this arrest as the silencing of a critical voice from within the government, whereas government officials claimed that an Okruashvili investigation had been underway for months, prompting the latter to up the ante and engage in demagoguery.

Okruashvili was later released and has set up an opposition party, which he currently runs in exile from France.

The opposition began to effectively mobilize only when it found financial support from Georgia's wealthiest man, business tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili. Patarkatsishvili founded one of Georgia's most popular television channels, Imedi TV, in 2003. He fell out with Saakashvili in 2006, and Imedi took on a much more pronounced antigovernment editorial policy after mid-2007. By October, Patarkatsishvili announced he would finance and lead the opposition to the Saakashvili administration and the movement to force the government out of power.

Government allegations that Patarkatsishvili posed a threat to Georgian democracy later appeared to be confirmed by evidence produced in a sting operation and made public at the end of December, only weeks before the presidential election in which Patarkatsishvili was a candidate. In video and audio footage, Patarkatsishvili was seen and heard in his London home attempting to bribe a high-level Interior Ministry official to generate falsified documents indicating electoral fraud on election night, indicating he would use the likely public discontent to take power, if necessary "liquidating" the interior minister. When confronted with these accusations, Patarkatsishvili did not deny their accuracy.¹⁸

Opposition rallies took place in Tbilisi on November 2, 2007, summoning at least 50,000 supporters on Rustaveli Avenue outside the parliament. The opposition coalition demanded Saakashvili's resignation. Following five tense days, riot police broke up demonstrations that had turned violent when the government tried to open the avenue for traffic on November 7. A state of emergency was announced, which lasted for ten days. Moreover, the police stormed Imedi, which had functioned as the opposition's main mouthpiece during the protests, on the grounds that it had encouraged unconstitutional attempts to change the government and shut it down.¹⁹ The police proceeded to break much of the station's equipment in the raid.

The events of November 7 can be regarded as a significant trauma in Georgian politics—it signaled the ultimate failure of political dialogue, radicalized the cleft between the country's political forces, and dramatically lowered public confidence in the government and the overall political process.

The crackdown dealt a severe blow to Saakashvili's democratic credentials. However, he managed to somewhat regain them when he announced snap presidential elections and early parliamentary elections on November 8, 2007.²⁰ Saakashvili won the presidential elections with 53 percent of the vote, according to the official tabulation, thus narrowly avoiding a runoff. The elections were marred by a strong distrust between the two sides, as well as allegations of the government intimidating opposition activists and committing electoral fraud. Two large protest rallies were organized in Tbilisi in January 2008 to protest the election results. International observers were critical of several aspects of the electoral process, such as verified cases of intimidation of voters, an unclear division between state activities and the UNM campaign, and problems with vote counts and tabulation. The election was nevertheless on the whole termed legitimate and "in line with most [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] and [Council of Europe] standards for democratic elections."²¹

Before the May 24, 2008, parliamentary elections, the electoral system was fiercely contested, the opposition arguing that its entire design was aimed at maximizing the number of parliamentary seats for the ruling party through overrepresentation in electoral commis-

sions and an increase in single mandate constituencies. The elections led to a victory for the UNM, which was able to use its name recognition and dominance in the outlying regions of the country to win seventy-one of the seventy-five single-mandate constituencies.²² Of course, the opposition's lackluster performance in both electoral campaigns helped the ruling party—the opposition's main candidate in the presidential election campaigned chiefly on a promise to abolish the institution of the presidency. After these elections, the Labor Party and the opposition coalition—at this time consisting of nine parties—decided to boycott parliament, leaving only the UNM and the newly formed Christian Democratic Party, and several minor parties, represented in parliament.

By the summer of 2008, Georgian politics were strongly polarized and acrimonious, with little trust or respect between the government and the opposition.

The War and Its Initial Impact on Politics, Opinion

In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, contradictory sentiments seemed to be reigning in society: Georgians felt defeated and humiliated at the hands of the Russian military but had gained a sense of pride in having stood up and fought against a power that had tormented the country for two decades (some would say two centuries). A similarly contradictory feeling was replicated in the political fallout of the conflict. On the one hand, Georgians rallied around their flag, and therefore around their leader. On the other hand, Georgians sensed that the war and the subsequent defeat would also weaken Saakashvili.

Survey data from Georgia unequivocally suggest a strengthening of public support for the government following the conflict. This is reflected especially in polling data from late 2008—in the immediate aftermath of the war—when the public was rallying around the president most strongly. Subsequent polls show the government losing some ground as that sense gradually dissipated, although not dramatically.²³ As table 1 shows, the level of trust in government institutions rose by an average of 15 points between 2007 and 2008; the president gained proportionally more trust than either government or parliament.

These levels are, in all likelihood, the result of the strong consensus in Georgian society on how the war in 2008 started. In late 2008, only 7 percent of Georgians surveyed believed that Georgia started the war, with 84 percent agreeing that Georgia reacted to Russian aggression.²⁴ In February 2009, the latter figure had fallen to 64 percent, still quite high, considering that several opposition politicians blamed Saakashvili for the war. Simultaneously, 39 percent mentioned the war as the number one failure of the Georgian govern-

TABLE 1. Levels of Trust in National Institutions in Georgia

	Trust		Neutral		Don't Trust	
	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008
President	32	51	31	26	37	21
Government	18	31	35	39	45	27
Parliament	19	33	37	35	43	29
Army	72	74	15	12	6	6

Source: Caucasus Resource Research Centers, "Data Project Initiative," Data Project Initiative—CRRC, <http://www.ccrccenters.org/index.php/en/5/999/> (accessed July 13, 2009).

ment.²⁵ Although many polls show a degree of trust in and support for the government, some polls show opposition politicians garnering more support than Saakashvili. A March 13, 2009 opinion poll published in the *Bankebi da finansebi* newspaper, for example, cited opposition candidate Alasania as the most popular candidate if presidential elections were held, receiving the support of 19 percent of those polled, compared to Saakashvili's 14 percent.²⁶ In principle, this and many other results indicate that a large section of Georgia's population is enthusiastic about neither the president nor the opposition.

The war initially led to a clear sense of unity in Georgian society. The opposition announced a moratorium of confrontation with the government on August 8, 2008,²⁷ but by

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October, that respite dissipated, with Burjanadze, the former chairperson of parliament, submitting forty-three questions to the president regarding the war.²⁸ Nevertheless, the war appears to have left a residual sense of the need for unity among a considerable section of the Georgian public. The opposition's failure to gather more than 100,000 people (an estimated 53,000–60,000 people attended the first day of protests, with numbers slipping rapidly into the thousands thereafter) for the launching of permanent demonstra-

tions on April 9 helped indicate this unity.²⁹

However, the war similarly left Saakashvili and his government vulnerable to a host of questions. An overwhelming majority of Georgians agree that the country was the victim of a Russian aggression. This should come as no surprise, given overwhelming evidence from various sources, including the Russian media, that Moscow planned this war at least several months in advance, and was engaging in constantly escalating provocations to force a war upon the Georgian leadership into an open conflict. This is evidenced by solid research carried out by a number of analysts, most prominently Russian scholars Andrei Illarionov and Pavel Felgenhauer.³⁰ It did so first in Abkhazia during the spring of 2008, and when Moscow failed to provoke the Georgian leadership to a military response there, it turned its attention to South Ossetia, where it successfully provoked a war by beginning to channel forces into sovereign Georgian territory in South Ossetia.³¹ However, the Western media's opinion was strongly skewed by Russian propaganda, which portrayed Georgia as the aggressor, in large part thanks to the cyber-attack that silenced Georgian media outlets, while Russia predeployed fifty journalists, whose scripted reporting helped influence reporting globally, to conflict zones.³²

In spite of this consensus, opposition parties inevitably questioned Saakashvili's handling of the war, particularly concerning the wisdom of the attack on Tskhinvali on the evening of August 8, which provided Moscow with a *casus belli*—no matter how trumped up it was—and led many Westerners to give Moscow the benefit of the doubt. More important, perhaps, the war called into question the entire rhetoric and style of Saakashvili's foreign policy, especially the harsh rhetoric his government had employed against Russia for several years, not to mention the calculations the government made in the months and years

before the war. Of course, these many questions appeared more troublesome in retrospect than they had at the time. Why had the government employed such harsh rhetoric against Russia? Did it fatally underestimate Moscow's power and intention to punish Georgia? Did it think the West would stop Russian aggression? Such questions inevitably arose around kitchen tables across Georgia.³³

No one can deny that Saakashvili's rhetoric toward Russia had been immensely popular among large sections of Georgian society. The only politician in the first half of Saakashvili's first term that came near the president's level of popularity was Okruashvili, the hawkish defense minister, who once vowed to celebrate New Year's Eve in the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. It was also Okruashvili who had said that "even if you export . . . feces to Russia, it can be sold there,"³⁴ when reacting to the 2006 Russian ban on Georgian wine (justified on clearly fabricated health concerns).³⁵ But hindsight changes matters, and what appeared straightforward and patriotic only a year ago may now be reconsidered as a reckless miscalculation in the public eye.

Which of these parallel and opposing tendencies will eventually come to dominate the interpretation of the conflict will be largely dependent on the government's policies, the opposition's response, and the government's ability to achieve its foreign policy priorities, such as integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. In this regard, the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has severely complicated matters. Although this does not impede Georgia's prospects of EU integration through the newly launched Eastern Partnership initiative, it may affect its prospects of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Already, influential voices in NATO argue that Georgia cannot become a member as long as these territories are occupied by Russian forces.³⁶ However, this is largely an issue of political will on the part of Georgia's Western partners—West Germany had an even more substantial unresolved conflict when it was admitted into NATO in 1955.

Government Policies

Saakashvili and his administration have shown a pragmatic ability to adapt to circumstances that sets them apart from other post-Soviet governments, something most obviously evident in the aftermath of the November 7 debacle involving the crackdown on demonstrators and the closing of Imedi. Saakashvili made concessions on many concrete policies, such as his rescheduling of parliamentary elections, which had been the opposition's major rallying cry. More important, the arrogance of power that many government officials previously exhibited disappeared, replaced by an attempt to reconnect with the people. In the same vein, after the war, the government took a number of steps to consolidate its position domestically and internationally. As it became clear that Western skepticism toward the government had markedly increased, foreign and domestic issues became strongly interrelated. Given Georgia's ambitious goals of Euro-Atlantic integration, maintaining progress in this direction in the aftermath of the war became crucial to maintaining domestic legitimacy; should the West appear more distant from Georgia, that would seriously undermine government's public support. Moreover, as polling suggests, the war drastically reduced the Georgian population's confidence in the West (and especially the United States) as an ally and public support for NATO membership.³⁷ Simply put, Russian force had a strong, intimidating impact.

Paradoxically, the continued threat of renewed Russian aggression made Western—especially U.S.—support more necessary for Georgia's survival as an independent state.

However, as the government realized, Western support would be contingent on continued progress in democratic reforms. Thus, continued commitment to democratization became a priority not only for domestic purposes, but also to ensure national security. That was acknowledged by parliamentary chairperson David Bakradze, who observed in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* that the government's "commitment to these democratic ideas is not abstract for us. It is a matter of life and death."³⁸

Concretely, the government launched a series of reforms in mid-September 2008, which Saakashvili dubbed a "Second Rose Revolution" in his United Nations General Assembly address.³⁹ The reforms promised were exhaustive. Parliament's powers were to be boosted, state funding for opposition parties was to be increased and broadened, and private property was to be strengthened. In an acknowledgment of the country's less-than-stellar record on media freedom, the president called the issue of media freedom "a challenge to our democracy," and vowed to launch a public, C-SPAN-like television channel that would give access to all opposition figures—a move that was subsequently implemented, providing for a plethora of talk shows, debate programs, and televised broadcasting of parliamentary sessions.

Saakashvili also promised judiciary reform, an area considered lacking in reform both by Georgia's international partners⁴⁰ and by the population (public trust in the courts is the lowest for any state institutions).⁴¹ The government's proposals called for appointing opposition figures to key institutions overseeing the judicial system, the lifetime appointment of judges, and the introduction of trial by jury. Nevertheless, implementation of these measures has been mixed, and it will take time for these measures to be fully executed.

The promises of an increased role for the parliament and especially the parliamentary opposition nevertheless appeared to be put into action as the government took several steps to increase the role of the parliamentary minority in the decision-making and legislative process. For example, a member of the opposition was elected as a vice-speaker of parliament, and the opposition was allowed to nominate a member to the Georgian National Communications Commission.⁴² Most important, a member of the opposition was allowed to chair the Temporary Parliamentary Commission Studying the August 2008 War, which held televised sessions. Late November 2008 saw a succession of high government officials and military officers testifying before the commission, culminating in Saakashvili giving five hours of testimony, a unique event in post-Soviet history. In the hearings, Saakashvili reiterated that Georgia had little choice when entering Tskhinvali on November 7, citing the ongoing shelling of Georgian villages and evidence that Russian troops were moving across the border. He also testified that previous Georgian attempts to negotiate solutions to the two conflicts with the Russian prime minister and president had constantly proven ineffective.⁴³

Reforms aimed at the reform of state institutions and political processes have been seemingly overshadowed by the immediate need to rebuild the Georgian economy, which received a disastrous blow from the war. Among other detriments, the war caused significant damage to Georgia's infrastructure and the renewed strain of approximately 20,000 new permanent internally displaced persons.⁴⁴ Worse still, Georgia's previously successful endeavor in attracting foreign direct investment took a serious downturn, leading to the interruption of several important investment projects. For example, in September 2008, Kazakhstan withdrew from the planned construction of a grain terminal and oil refineries.⁴⁵ The global financial crisis added to the strain on all sectors of the Georgian

economy, causing increased unemployment and thus the connected potential for increased societal unrest. To assist Georgia's recovery from the war, a major joint donor conference was held in Brussels on October 22, 2008, co-chaired by the European Commission and the World Bank.⁴⁶ The participating countries and organizations promised Georgia a significant aid package of US\$4.5 billion for 2009–11. This package was intended to help shield Georgia from the combined impacts of the war and the financial crisis, and constituted an important signal of Western support for Georgia's future development.

The Georgian government responded to the fallout of the war by promising wide-ranging reforms that, if implemented, would put Georgia firmly back on track toward democratic consolidation. A number of these steps were implemented, although more systemic reform, particularly in the judiciary sector, appears to be slow in implementation. Nevertheless, the refusal of the majority of the opposition parties not represented in parliament to engage in dialogue with the government has been a serious impediment to the government's plans.

The Strengthening of the Opposition

In 2008, several important members of the government and the UNM moved into the opposition camp after either being dismissed or voluntarily leaving the government. The most significant among these include Zurab Noghaideli, the former prime minister, who was discharged soon after the events of November 2007, and Burjanadze, the former parliamentary speaker, who left the UNM shortly before the May 24 parliamentary elections because of disagreements concerning electoral candidate lists. Both later formed their own parties. Following the August war, Georgia's ambassador to Russia, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, resigned and voiced strong criticism of the government's handling of both the war and its overall relations to Russia. In December 2008, Alasania, Georgia's respected and popular envoy to the United Nations, also resigned and set up his own team and subsequently political party, Our Georgia – Free Democrats, which is now allied with the New Rights Party and Republican Party in the newly created Alliance for Georgia. Several high-level Georgian diplomats abroad resigned to join Alasania, who previously had served as chief negotiator in Abkhazia, deputy defense minister, and deputy national security minister.

The defections of several reputable and well-known figures strengthened the opposition movement domestically and also provided it with increased international credibility. Burjanadze and Alasania in particular have well-established political networks among Georgia's Western allies. Alasania's personal story—he lost his father in the final battle for Sukhumi in 1993 in which he also took part—has provided him with a strong degree of legitimacy and credibility among the Georgian public. Alasania and his alliance regularly poll highest among the opposition forces, and he is likely to be a leading choice to be the opposition candidate when the next presidential elections are held, if the opposition can agree on a joint candidate.

The most outspoken and uncompromising elements among the opposition have received most of the attention, which was strengthened by the decision by new high-profile figures joining the opposition (e.g., Burjanadze and Alasania) to support demands for Saakashvili's resignation as their main focus. Meanwhile, the government's more compromise-oriented attitude has enabled the moderate opposition represented in parliament to grow, and it has started to exercise the normal role of a parliamentary opposition. Most prominent among

these forces is the Christian Democratic Party, led by Giorgi Targamadze, a journalist and former news anchor at Imedi. Targamadze and several other well-known journalists resigned from Imedi following the revelations of Patarkatsishvili's coup plans and formed a moderate oppositional party. That move was rewarded in the subsequent elections, in which the party received 8 percent of the vote, making it the largest opposition party.⁴⁷

All major political actors in Georgia share views on the necessary means for achieving the country's national security goals. There is near consensus on the necessity of maintaining a strong strategic relationship with the United States, seeking NATO membership and strengthening ties with the European Union (EU), and it is tantamount to political suicide in Georgia to advocate an overtly Russia-leaning foreign policy. Political controversy largely focuses on the government's and president's successes or failures in living up to the democratic standards they have set for themselves.

The opposition movement's main weakness is its overt dependency on strong personalities who have very little in common, apart from viewing Saakashvili as an authoritarian president and wanting a change of government. The fact that most of the opposition's activities has consisted of rallies and hunger strikes outside parliament, rather than presenting practical political alternatives to the government and its policies, appears to have limited its prospects of gaining public support. The opposition's refusal to engage in dialogue with the government, arguing that the only topic for discussion could be the terms for the president's resignation, can hardly be viewed as a constructive stance and was not supported by a majority of Georgians. In a February 2009 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, 81 percent of Georgians surveyed wanted the government and opposition to continue dialogue, whereas only 28 percent supported the opposition's demands for the president's resignation. Fifty-one percent supported the president's call for political unity.⁴⁸

As the opposition again gathered support during the spring of 2009, it announced permanent protest rallies beginning April 9 to demand Saakashvili's resignation. The differences between the radical opposition forces who were intent to force the government out of power, and the more moderate ones led by Alasania, who preferred peaceful means, such as gathering signatures to force an early election, were nevertheless blurred when the moderates decided to join the radicals for the demonstrations. In late March, however, the opposition was dealt a blow as several Burjanadze supporters were arrested on charges of storing and hiding weapons, and two members of a minor opposition group were detained on alleged plans to storm the Tbilisi television tower and possibly the parliament during the demonstrations.⁴⁹ Days later, Georgian television aired photographs of Burjanadze's husband, Badri Bitsadze, meeting in Kiev with a person representing wealthy Georgians in Russia, such as Aslan Abashidze, allegedly seeking funding for the protests.⁵⁰ In June, footage was released by the Georgian Ministry of the Interior of opposition politicians Davit Gamkrelidze and Levan Gachechiladze meeting with the much-reviled Shevardnadze-era interior minister Kakha Targamadze, in Berlin.

These events were quite indicative of the lack of trust prevalent between political actors in Georgia. The Georgian government viewed the political instability resulting from the polarized climate as a serious vulnerability to the state, suspecting Russian funding and manipulation of opposition actors with the intent of forcing a regime change. However, sting operations and secret video recordings fuel perceptions among the opposition of increasingly repressive practices on the government's part and radicalize opposition demands for regime change.

The opposition demonstrations nevertheless gathered far smaller crowds than organizers had hoped. More than 50,000 people showed up for the April 9 demonstration and a far smaller number appeared at a rally on May 26, Georgia's Independence Day.⁵¹ The low numbers reflected the Georgian public's fatigue with high-profile demonstrations carrying very little promise of constructive outcomes. The opposition sought to make the rallies permanent by setting up tents and improvised prison cells outside the parliament and the presidential residence, blocking several of Tbilisi's main thoroughfares, and bringing in activists from other regions to increase their numbers. The government responded by pulling police off the streets, moving them inside the perimeter of buildings to be protected rather than mixing with protestors on the street. The discipline exerted by both the authorities and the opposition helped avoid a repeat of November 2007, which earned Georgia respect among Western observers. The confrontation was generally handled in a calm and professional way by both the authorities and the opposition. Both sides seemed to understand the dangers that a repeat of November 2007 would hold for Georgia at this extremely fragile moment in time. Nevertheless, unexplained beatings of opposition activists at the demonstrations, and several opposition members' attempts to provoke tensions with the authorities, indicate the high level of tension involved.⁵²

The prospect of a normalized political situation is, however, preconditioned on resumed dialogue between the political factions, followed by real progress in addressing the lagging political reforms in Georgia. The government has initiated a dialogue on reforms aiming in this direction. Nevertheless, opposition politicians (with the exception of Alasania's group) have thus far viewed this invitation as a public relations stunt, reiterating their demand that the president resign before engaging in any dialogue.

In 2009, the Christian Democrats under Targamadze sought to further capitalize on their brand name and their position holding the middle ground in Georgian politics, seeking to find space for compromise and dialogue between the government and the more radical opposition. That effort was further strengthened by the statement of the highly influential patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II, who urged the opposition to drop their demand for the president's resignation, and pushed for the government to be more conciliatory in its offers of dialogue in late May 2009.⁵³ Although such voices are rarely given international media attention, they are clearly growing, and the increasing popularity of both Targamadze and Alasania is a sign of that. Moderation also grew more attractive when the large-scale demonstrations that started on April 9 proved ineffective and as the opposition gradually lost popularity because it blocked major thoroughfares in Tbilisi for weeks on end.

On the whole, the trend during spring 2009 could be viewed as progress in Georgia's democratization. Most significant, for the first time in Georgia's modern political history, radicalism has not paid off. The general consensus is that the opposition lost credibility because of the radicalism of the demonstrations and the demonstrators' maximalist demands; opposition politicians' popularity ratings indicate that the more radical opposition politicians lost most ground. The opposing trajectories of Burjanadze and Alasania are the most vivid illustration: given her close association with the regime, Burjanadze appears to have believed that her best chance to gain popularity was to outdo the rest of the opposition in terms of radicalism. Nevertheless, that strategy led her popularity ratings to drop like a stone. Conversely, Alasania's decision to pull the opposition toward moderation clearly resonated more strongly with the Georgian public. The Georgian political class as

a whole will hopefully draw the right conclusions from this state of affairs, which may lead to a more conciliatory and issue-oriented political climate.

The Georgian People's Views: It's the Economy, Stupid!

Lost in the confrontation between government and opposition are the actual views of the silent majority of Georgians. These appear to differ from both political camps; they are mainly concerned about issues, particularly security, territorial integrity, and the economy, and less worried about the personal rivalries between political leaders.

Interestingly (and conforming with international experience) the opposition's boycott does not have public support. In 2008, 59 percent of Georgians opposed the united opposition's decision to boycott parliament, with only 19 percent supporting it; conversely, 67 percent of Georgians expressed support for the Christian Democratic Party's decision to take up their seats in parliament; only 15 percent opposed it. The stable proportion of Georgians supporting dialogue between the opposition and the government—81–88 percent throughout the past year—further strengthens this interpretation.⁵⁴ Against this background, the growth in popularity of the moderate, “loyal” parliamentary opposition is not surprising. Only 15 percent of Georgians think unsanctioned demonstrations are an acceptable form of protest, and only 4 percent approve of occupying buildings.⁵⁵ This suggests that only about one-fifth of Georgia's population supports the opposition's uncompromising stance. Although this portion is by no means a negligible number, discontent with the government is much more vocal and concentrated in Tbilisi than in the outlying regions.

Among the issues, unemployment is by far the most pressing concern for most Georgians, equal only to territorial integrity in the minds of the population. However, Georgians still accord higher value to immaterial principles over concrete, tangible ones. Thus, 59 percent of Georgians mentioned restoration of territorial integrity as the government's first priority, with job creation a distant second at 29 percent, just ahead of NATO and EU integration at 7 percent.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The paradox in post–Rose Revolution Georgian politics between state building and democratization has created a complex situation. The strength of the presidency vis-à-vis other government institutions has provided efficiency in conducting reforms, but it has simultaneously reduced many checks and balances within the political system, opening the country to criticism of its democratization record. The erosion of political consensus on postrevolutionary politics is both natural and to be expected. However, this process has been coupled with public grievances related to poverty, unemployment, and the backdrops of liberal economic reform. The opposition parties, because of both the “super-presidential” constitution and the immaturity of the Georgian party system, have been unable to play a constructive role.

The impact of the war on Georgian domestic politics is not easily interpreted. The government's popularity increased, but the war's outcomes have fueled further political polarization. Although the appetite for street demonstrations has been strong among Georgia's extraparliamentary opposition parties, such measures command only limited support among the Georgian population, making these protests a partial failure. The failure was only partial because the demonstrations did force the government to implicitly concede that it could not move forward without addressing the demands of between 20–30 percent

of the country's population, and that serious compromise involving some perspective of power sharing was unavoidable. How progress could be achieved on these fronts nevertheless remains an open question.

The link between continued democratization and Georgia's national security also remains unclear. The Georgian government is currently in the process of restoring its democratic credentials, which were called into question by several of its Western allies in 2007. To secure continued Western engagement, it is vital that the Georgian government proves capable of continuing to deliver on its promised reforms, while achieving deeper systemic changes, such as strengthening the judiciary and reforming the electoral system. For the same purposes, it is vital that Western engagement and support for Georgia's democratization process, as well as its national security, remains firm.

Developments over the past two years in Georgian politics underline the importance of strengthening political contestation through the parliamentary process, providing a more meaningful role of opposition parties in Georgian politics, and reforming the electoral system to allow for greater diversity in political representation. Such reforms require constitutional changes, which must be conducted with the aim of achieving political consensus through dialogue between political actors. The main impediment to these goals has been the highly personalized and polarized nature of Georgian politics. In the summer of 2009, however, the prospect of a new step forward in Georgia's democratic development appears slightly more likely than it previously did.

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