

The EU and Georgia's turmoil

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>>> Georgia is beset by street protests. It may be on the brink of another war with Russia. Georgia's political elite are concerned about the lack of security guarantees from the West. Yet the ruling elite itself is also to blame. Mikhail Saakashvili's government has failed to strike a balance between democracy and national security concerns. Tbilisi has only sought to wave the European flag rather than adopting European values in a deep-rooted fashion.

The current internal political crisis calls Georgia's statehood into question. The blockade of Tbilisi's main streets by opposition demonstrators demanding Saakashvili's resignation is a stark reminder of the threat looming over the country. The Georgian case suggests that democratic norms should not be violated to speed up economic reforms and strengthen national security, especially when one's neighbour is a hostile and non-democratic great power.

REFORMS

After the Rose revolution President Mikhail Saakashvili pushed through rapid reforms, many say impatiently. But NATO and links with the United States rather than EU integration became the priority. Economic growth, banking reforms and the fight against crime and corruption have progressed well. But, looking for prompt successes to satisfy post-revolution Georgian society's expectations, Saakashvili has ended up firing and appointing ministers almost every month. This has weakened state institutions and reduced both the government's security and its ability to work on long-term goals. The president failed to take the opportunity fully to consolidate multi-party democracy after 2004.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ongoing protests against the government in Georgia are a real concern, but also present an opportunity to deepen the country's fragile democracy.
- Both government and opposition appear to be adopting more measured positions than in the past, but polarisation remains a possibility.
- With Georgia remaining brittle internally and threatened by further Russian aggression, the EU needs to seize the moment more proactively to help the country's reforms.

»»»»» Shortly after the revolution, concerns about freedom of speech also came to the forefront. Saakashvili began to curb independent TV channels. At the same time, the Ministry of the Interior has emerged as the most powerful state institution – the only one to have avoided personnel changes and which is thus able to develop into an effective state institution. It therefore serves as a pillar of the new regime, protecting it from domestic foes and further revolutions or coups. The fear of being toppled by a new revolution seems to have plagued the young president. This and his impetuous style of governance have limited the impact of the reforms Georgia has undertaken.

Saakashvili now asks for calm in the name of Georgian statehood. But according to the opposition it is Saakashvili who poses the greatest danger to the Georgian state by having deprived it of free and fair elections in 2007 and embroiled it in a disastrous war. The opposition also claim that the country is not ruled by its institutions but rather by the decisions of the president and a very small group of his confidants – a "clan democracy".

The Georgian opposition has learned lessons from previous political defeats. These include the need to stay united despite ideological differences or personal enmities. However, the opposition has failed to develop a plan "B" in the event that Saakashvili survives the current protests that have aimed at forcing his resignation. They simply counted on the authorities using force, which would further erode Western support and finally discredit Saakashvili at home. Saakashvili also seems to have learned a lesson: he has started to adopt a European style of conflict management. Two months of protest have led to an unpleasant situation for the protesters tired of living in tents, the commuters fed up of the streets being blocked, and the government and opposition who have no strategy to exit the crisis. As Saakashvili refuses to step down, the opposition could persist by staying united and continuing with the demonstrations to elicit some kind of government response. However, the government has called for dialogue and offered concessions. These include curbing the president's authority, modestly empowering the parliament, working jointly for judiciary

reforms and running direct elections for the mayor of Tbilisi.

The demonstrations have endangered the government less than originally expected as it has adopted a peaceful and patient European approach. The concessions could therefore be considered as successful and beneficial to Georgia's democracy. However, opposition leaders who are victims of their own populist rhetoric cannot easily exchange Saakashvili's head for such reforms. All politics in Georgia is personal: as Saakashvili was revered as a hero in 2003, so now he is excoriated for every failure. Georgia is an emblematic example of a country suffering from strong individuals and weak state institutions.

In particular, Saakashvili's government has failed to develop a strong and independent judiciary in the apparent belief that independence of the courts could hamper the process of rapid modernisation. Those who fail to obtain justice in the courts tend to look for it in the streets. For the government finally to acknowledge the need for judicial reform would be a real achievement for the opposition.

The protests have also drawn attention to the need for a gradual transition towards a parliamentary system. Although the opposition is divided over this issue, and the government still does not consider it at all, such a reform could enable both sides to maintain face politically, and give a new impetus to Georgian democracy. This would help Georgian politics reduce its overwhelmingly personal dimension.

RUSSIAN TROOPS IN TBILISI?

Russian troops are currently some 40 kilometres from Tbilisi. Georgians' consequent feeling of insecurity is compounded by the insistence of the Russian press on the need for a "final solution to the Georgian problem". The Russian army would be capable of capturing Tbilisi in a few hours. The US is unlikely to engage in war with the nuclear superpower for the sake of Georgia. Although Russia would be subject to widespread condemnation, no

one would stop buying its gas and Russia would take control of the southern energy corridors passing through Georgian territory. The “great victory against Saakashvili’s regime” would undoubtedly allow the Russian government to distract attention from mundane domestic problems like unemployment and shrinking incomes. Saakashvili, along with many civil servants and Western-educated Georgians, would have to flee Georgia. Moscow would find Georgians to take over the leadership and would explain that “all the ills were caused by

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Saakashvili’s immoral and irresponsible policies” and “Georgians and Russians should live peacefully side by side.” Moscow would allow and encourage emigration, and the new Georgian government would request Russian protection.

However, the above scenario is unlikely. Although Moscow has taken advantage of all opportunities to increase its influence of late, it has plenty of reasons not to invade Georgia again. Another investors’ panic, combined with low oil prices, could set back the Russian economy by a decade. More importantly still, there is a chance that hot-headed Georgians (or disorganised Ukrainians) would destroy their state by themselves, with some help from a certain “friend”. However, Moscow understands that relations with Georgia, with or without Saakashvili, will not improve as long as Abkhazia and South Ossetia are occupied, and that any new government in Georgia will stay committed to the pro-Western stance.

The Kremlin may have harboured hopes that at some point the situation in Tbilisi would descend into major disorder, giving Moscow some legitimate pretext for intervening. However, Saakashvili’s effective crisis management has made this unlikely. Russia is not going to give up these territories, which symbolise Russia’s regained self-confidence. This therefore

seems to be another battle of nerves, especially as the Georgian government is trying to capitalise on the fear of Russian intervention. Many Georgians have no doubt that the demonstrations may be supported by Russian money, though the Ministry of the Interior has failed to publish evidence of this. Even the mysterious mutiny at one of Georgia’s military bases was not linked to Russia in the end.

The fact that no clear evidence has been found does not negate Russia’s potential involvement. Russia can do a lot for Georgia, but understands that Georgians tend to unite in the face of an external enemy. Both Shevardnadze and Saakashvili have profited from this stance in the past. During the August 2008 war Russian troops stopped near Tbilisi, ostensibly hoping that frightened Georgians would topple Saakashvili. But no one spoke out against the government until the Russian troops withdrew to Abkhazian and South Ossetian soils.

THE EU: ONLY FLYING THE FLAG?

Russia might have the necessary weapons and geopolitical advantage, but Europe has something else – society’s trust. Indeed, Georgians today have faith in two institutions: the Georgian church and the European Union. No wonder the Georgian government proudly flies the EU flag on every state building.

Although Europeans benefit from their relatively strong presence on the ground, their knowledge of what is going on and the trust they have gained from society, they still lack influence in politics. The Nabucco pipeline remains a distant aspiration. The EU’s limited military influence, its division over Russia and the lack of carrots offered do not do Europe any favours. Yet the fundamental problem still seems to be the EU’s inability to implant its values in the traditionally war torn region and among the political elite.

Relations between the EU and Georgia are thus more than ambivalent: Both sides indulge in



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»»»»» much rhetoric but very little action is based on a common understanding. The Georgian government waves the EU flag but it favours a zero-sum game in local and international politics over win-win tactics. Its prominent members are very critical of Germany and France for seeking to curry Russia's favour, and are unwilling to recognise the considerable assistance that the EU (including those two countries) provided after the August war.

The August war dealt a particularly big blow to Georgia's Western aspirations. However, compared to Ukraine, Georgia is making a serious effort to undertake reforms. The question for both the EU and Georgia is how to proceed with strengthening state institutions and developing Georgia in the current scenario. The Eastern Partnership must demonstrate it can help on this issue. Saakashvili has come belatedly to realise the importance of EU cooperation relative to NATO. But Europeans need a more concerted effort in order to take advantage of this.

A WAY OUT

The dialogue-based strategy of dealing with the demonstrators gives the government an advantage: after two months of being patient, Saakashvili is less likely to lose his nerve and order the use of force. The opposition is already divided about future plans, while more of its leaders are realising the need for dialogue.

There are two scenarios. Dialogue might continue, with the increasing involvement of both the Georgian church and the EU. The opposition will try to ensure that the government does not evade its obligations toward reforms. This is where the EU can exercise its influence, as Saakashvili cannot ignore public opinion in Europe. Georgia's dependence on the West has not been negligible and has further increased since the Russo-Georgian war. EU experts could get involved in the commissions working on reforms. In order to save face, the opposition could proclaim that depriving an individual of

his power while preventing anyone else from attaining the same degree of power is a better achievement than just unseating that individual. As for the government, it could take pride in implementing reforms to strengthen democracy in the country, and Saakashvili could offer posts in a re-shuffled cabinet to some opposition leaders.

The second scenario is less benign. The opposition might split and more moderate leaders might talk to the government to strike a deal to work jointly on reforms. Both the government and the moderate part of the opposition might consider forgoing their rivalry in the face of imminent danger (the Russia occupation). In these circumstances, the government would find it much easier – at least in the short term – to discredit and marginalise the remaining radicals who might refuse to participate in the deal and try to continue with their demonstrations. The reconciled opposition would try to keep the EU involved as far as possible given their lack of trust in Saakashvili. In this case, the country could head for another serious crisis: some politicians may abandon the government and join the re-emerging opposition. Georgia would then return to street demonstrations again.

Both scenarios outlined above would require the active involvement of the EU. After the failed attempt to win a NATO Membership Action Plan there is growing demand and an ever greater need to deepen cooperation with the EU. This will further push Saakashvili not to finish his second term, leading the country towards parliamentary democracy.

If mutual suspicions and fears remain, there is a more disquieting scenario: a bloody conflict between the government and the opposition. Even if the government manages to clear the streets of tents, demonstrations would be likely to start again after a few months, throwing Georgia into a more serious crisis. History serves as a warning: the demonstrations against Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first Georgian presi-

dent, which began in September 1991 and were followed by a civil war; the Rose Revolution of November 2003; the biggest demonstrations against Saakashvili's rule in October-November 2007, which were ultimately dispersed by force. Saakashvili and his aides should realise that even if they might be able to score another tactical victory against the opposition, sooner or later the existing shortcomings in the Georgian political system will resurface. Yet the opposition should also realise, whether they like it or not, how closely Saakashvili's government is tied to Georgia's statehood. This point must not be forgotten amidst the perfectly justified calls for a more genuine reform programme. Given the current circumstances, Georgia is in peril, but both sides do have a potential exit strategy. Georgia could head towards both a parliamentary system and the EU.

The EU should therefore encourage Georgia further along the path of reform much more proactively. Now that its chances of NATO integration have been undermined, Georgia will concentrate on the EU. The EU should present itself more assertively to ordinary Georgians by conducting public awareness campaigns and promoting its values and benefits. Georgia's drive towards the West would thus stem more genuinely from the will of the people rather than the government. The current crisis offers the EU an opportunity. Despite the confidence the EU enjoys in Georgia, the latter's citizens still feel that Europe neither understands nor appreciates them. The time has come to reach out to a country that deserves a chance.

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