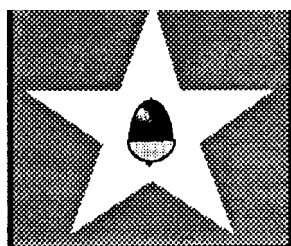


Conflict Studies Research Centre

C W Blandy

**Georgia
At the Crossroads**

December 2003



**Occasional
Brief No 100**

Georgia At the Crossroads

C W Blandy

The formation of an interim government could be the harbinger of much-needed change and reform. This brief outlines the main political players and summarises the economic and constitutional challenges the new government will face. It also highlights the potential destabilising effects of Russian and US involvement in Georgia's internal processes.

Georgia's Vulnerability

When looking at the present situation in Georgia, it is helpful to remember that having been under the direct rule of Russia and then the USSR for over 200 years, Georgia experienced a two-edged sword of protection which deprived the Georgian nation of independence and decision-making in both foreign and internal affairs. To this one of the worst and most pervasive aspects of Communist life must be added: the blight of corruption. It is perhaps not surprising that political institutions in the comparatively new sovereign Republic are not fully developed. As Dr Aleksandr Rondeli wrote in 1998:

“New, independent states are particularly sensitive to security problems, as they lack the experience that comes from independent statehood. They have not had the opportunity to develop a defined culture for strategic planning or foreign policy engineering. Furthermore, newly independent states - only just emerging as sovereign, autonomous actors feel insecure and quite uncertain about what their security interests and priorities should be, and how to go about defining them. Thus, they tend to underestimate certain security threats, exaggerate others and, sometimes, even miss vital factors in the game of national security planning. Their strategic visions, and corresponding calculations, are mainly based on historical memories, which themselves are constructed with reference to ethnic lines.”¹

Much of Georgia's present ills have their origins in its long relationship with Russia. The large mass of Russia to the north totally dominates the small Republic. *“It is very hard to find common language with a country which is much bigger and stronger and which has assisted two secessionist parts of your territory with military force, has given [Russian] citizenship to people who live*

*there, did nothing to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, aggravated Tbilisi's relations with the regions and keeps applying pressure on Georgia."*²

Headlines such as '*Chaotic pluralism in a weak state*'³ are not helpful. They make no recognition of the rich legacy of Georgia's outstanding cultural heritage, which covers a lengthy span from the 5th Century to the present time. Whilst Georgian culture might appear to have little relevance to high politics and economics, it helps to describe the depth of the Georgian soul and its many contradictions. One of the heartening features of the situation in Georgia at the present time is the number of young people, well educated professionals, eager to participate in the future of their country. This contrasts with the cynical lack of interest of many young people in the former USSR.

The Parliamentary Elections 2003

Box 1 - Georgian Parliamentary Electoral System⁴

Parliament is elected for a four year term.

The Georgian Unicameral Parliament has 235 MPs.

150 MPs are elected by proportional representation from candidate lists furnished by blocs and parties. At least 33% of the Georgian electorate have to vote under the party-list system for those votes to be declared valid. Only blocs and parties that attain more than 7% of the votes cast can win seats.

The remaining 85 MPs are elected from single seat constituencies. The winning candidate requires 33% of the votes cast. If this condition is not met, a date has to be fixed for a run-off of the two top candidates within two weeks. 10 of these seats are reserved for Abkhaz MPs from the 1992 elections. The November 2003 elections were not held in the breakaway Republic of Abkhazia nor in some constituencies in South Osetia.

Overall responsibility for planning, preparation and conduct of elections is vested in the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), which has subordinate commissions in each constituency and at each polling station.

On 2 November 2003 voting took place in 79 electoral districts at 2,870 polling stations. 2.9 million voters were registered. 225 seats were contested by almost 3,700 candidates. There were 59 further electoral districts situated outside Georgia; 31 in Russia, and 16 in Moscow alone. The electorate not only had to vote for candidates in the parliamentary elections but also to decide on a proposed reduction in the number of seats in the Georgian Parliament from 2007 onwards, when the next round of parliamentary elections were due, from the current 235 to fewer than 150. It will be remembered that in the October 1990 elections there were 300 deputies.⁵

Georgia At the Crossroads

The main pre-election competition was between the pro-presidential bloc “Coalition for a New Georgia” and the parties which formed the opposition bloc, the “Saakashvili-National Movement” and “Burdzhanadze-Democrats”. The opposition was extremely popular, and according to a poll carried out by Strana.ru before the election, around 75% of the electorate expressed dissatisfaction with the president. Moreover, “*passions in the country were at incandescent breaking point*”.⁶

Almost from the start of voting on 2 November reports of violations at polling stations were legion, the most frequent complaint being the failure to include people on electoral lists; according to the CEC this amounted to 5%. The opposition bloc believed the percentage was more like 20%. Among the catalogue of other violations, in Zugdidi up to half the electorate were unable to vote. There were massive protests in Zugdidi and Rustavi. In Kutaisi there was an absence of voting papers in 25 polling stations which did not open on time. In Maurineli names had been ticked on electoral lists as having voted already before voters arrived. In Bolnisskiy district pressure was applied to the electorate to vote for the pro-government bloc. The results of 17 polling stations were declared invalid because of procedural errors and violations. These were planned to undergo a second round of voting on 16 November 2003.

On 3 November 2003, the first reports of international observers became public. Representatives from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) remarked that they were shocked by the number of violations, “*The population of Georgia deserve much better elections than those which we saw on Sunday*”.⁷ Moreover, the OSCE Parliamentary Representative Bruce George stated that the elections did not meet international standards. Similar points were echoed by the head of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly in Georgia Konstantin Markelov.

Opinion polls conducted prior to the elections had indicated that the radical opposition parties were well ahead of the pro-government bloc. The television station Rustavi-2 commissioned the Tbilisi Institute for Polling and Marketing to conduct a poll of 3,000 respondents throughout Georgia between 29 September and 3 October 2003 with the question “*If the elections were held today, who would you vote for?*”⁸

From the results of this poll, the opposition parties could expect 29.3% of the vote as opposed to the pro-presidential “Coalition for New Georgia” with a mere 5.9%. However, whilst the figures represented pre-election feeling, they disregarded the respondents’ replies about whether or not they were actually going to vote. In a second poll conducted between 19-22 October 2003, whilst the combined opposition bloc dropped to 25.4%, the “Coalition for a New Georgia” edged up to 7.6%. Aslan Abashidze’s (Abkhaz) “Union for Georgia’s Democratic Revival” obtained 10.3% in the first opinion poll and 7.6% in the second. The opposition bloc could have expected to win the elections on 2 November 2003. Two exit polls supported their optimism.⁹

Preliminary results from 795 polling stations out of 2,870 which slithered out from the CEC on 5 November 2003 are shown below.

Table 1 - Preliminary Election Results¹⁰

Party Blocs	Interim Assessment % of Votes cast	Remarks
Coalition for a New Georgia	23.7	Pro-Presidential
Saakashvili National Movement	22.1	Opposition
Labour Party	15.4	
Union for Georgia's Democratic Revival	9.9	Abashidze
Burdzhanadze-Democrats	9.0	Opposition

The opposition parties refused to accept the result. How could a jump from 7.6% to 23.7% for "Coalition for New Georgia" be explained with a president whose popularity had almost sunk to zero? Quite possibly there were many on the government payroll who became fearful of losing a welcome source of additional, untaxed income – a manifestation of the scope and extent of corruption in Georgian life.

In the event, the final results made public on 20 November, did not mirror the opinion polls either. One fact which exacerbated the exasperation of the opposition bloc was the long delay in announcing the results. As each day passed without an official announcement, their suspicions of vote rigging increased.

Table 2 - Final Confirmed Results¹¹

Party Blocs	% of Votes cast	Seats	Remarks
Coalition for a New Georgia	21.32	38	Pro-Presidential
Union for Georgia's Democratic Revival	18.84	32	Abashidze
Saakashvili National Movement	18.8	32	Opposition
Labour Party	12.04	20	
Burdzhanadze-Democrats	8.79	15	Opposition
New Right	7.35	12	
Industry Will Save Georgia	6.17	0	Below 7% threshold

Given a history of intimidation at the ballot box in Adzharia, the more recent attempts to stop the opposition "Saakashvili National Movement" from staging an election rally in Batumi, the ransacking of the opposition headquarters in Batumi on 23 October and the assault on David Berdzenishvili (a Republican Party representative) on 24 October 2003, it is doubtful whether the success of Abashidze's Union for Georgia's Democratic Revival would have taken the opposition parties by surprise. Nevertheless, the results meant that President Shevardnadze could count on some 70 seats in all, compared to the combined opposition bloc with only 47 seats. Not only had Shevardnadze neutralised the opposition, he had also allowed himself to become indebted to Abashidze. This majority threatened to

Georgia At the Crossroads

reduce the opposition to insignificance. In their bitter experience the paramount opponent of change was Shevardnadze himself and the party under his patronage. The explosion of people onto the streets was not only an expression of sheer frustration and disbelief from the opposition, it was also supported by an overwhelming proportion of the population throughout Georgia.

Shevardnadze's taste for continuance in office had increased with age, and led to a continual balancing of internal factions to the detriment of effective governance, which in turn allowed widespread corruption amongst political elites, poverty, abuse of human rights, nepotism and fiscal incompetence in revenue collection to flourish. As Tamara Pataraiia wrote in 2001: "*Although the legislation that has been adopted over the last ten years is in relative harmony with democratic values, its implementation remains poor. Georgia has yet to develop practical mechanisms for efficient state governance based on the principles of democratic government ...*"¹²

It is true that for Georgia in the 1990s the path to independence and the immediate aftermath was complicated, turbulent and uncertain: the process of developing, safeguarding and enshrining constitutional principles and the creation of democratic institutions since 1992 has been no less fraught and dramatic against a setting of regional complication, political strains, internal conflict and dissent exacerbated by wide-scale corruption. On the question of nepotism, perhaps the record speaks for itself: Shevardnadze's family connections¹³ are but one aspect of what has come to dominate political life in Georgia. During Shevardnadze's first incarnation as Georgian leader in 1972-1985 he was regarded "*as the most corrupt in the country's recent history. Economic statistics were rigged, bribes to top Russian and Georgian officials became commonplace.*"¹⁴ Even before the Presidential elections in April 2000, there was an air of despondency.

The opposition had come to realise by summer 2001 that Shevardnadze had neither the energy nor the will to implement change. Ivane Merabishvili, head of the Parliament's economic policy committee in April 2001 noted: "[*Even*] as a member of his party, I feel, he does not have the political will to change anything".¹⁵ Later that year, with support for government policy at a mere 6%, the reformers gave Shevardnadze a simple choice – either support us or the conservatives. Shevardnadze opted for the conservatives, and the comfortable association of colleagues of long standing and similar age, with the result that not only did Zurab Zhvania air his grievances publicly in a letter to the President demanding action be taken on corruption, but Mikhail Saakashvili, then Justice Minister, resigned saying "*reform of the government from within was impossible*".¹⁶

The Immediate Aftermath of Elections

Appendix 1 provides an outline chronology of events between 3 November and 27 November 2003. Some of these events highlight markers which may

have significant implications for the future of Georgia. For instance, one cannot but note:

- The relationship between Shevardnadze and Abashidze, together with the latter's close links with Moscow.
- The speedy arrival of Igor Ivanov, Russian Foreign Minister, following the occupation of the parliament building by the opposition on 22 November and his chairing of the meeting on 23 November which led to Shevardnadze announcing his resignation.
- Ivanov's flight immediately after that meeting to Batumi in Adzharia.
- The triangular meeting of the heads of the Georgian autonomies with Ivanov on 27 November in Moscow.
- Introduction of preferential visa arrangements by Moscow for Adzharians.

Many commentators have condemned the actions of Saakashvili and his supporters in occupying the Parliament building and their attitude toward Shevardnadze. It is important to remember though, that the police, internal troops and the military did not intervene. Furthermore, there was no bloodshed.

The Interim Government

The leadership of the interim government, Mikhail Saakashvili (Saakashvili-National Movement), Nino Burdzhaneladze and Zurab Zhvania (Burdzhaneladze-Democrats), appear to be working as a triumvirate, with Burdzhaneladze becoming the interim president as provided for by the constitution through her previous position as Speaker of the Parliament, Zhvania as State Minister (Prime Minister) and Saakashvili as the bloc's nominee for President. The fact that they have agreed the division of responsibilities between them must give a measure of optimism for the future of the country. While this triumvirate lasts, power will be shared and the potential negative effects of presidential zeal curbed. The rot in Georgian politics under Shevardnadze was so bad that a strong approach is required to rectify the situation. Six blocs (some 22 parties) secured seats during the election, offering the prospect of wide-ranging and lively debate in Parliament. Many Georgian parties have developed from being NGOs under Communist rule, when they set themselves the task of preserving Georgian culture. Overall, 36 parties participated, each with their own shades of opinion and views. The future government cannot therefore take unanimity for granted.

Mikhail Saakashvili

Saakashvili was Justice Minister until he resigned in summer 2001 because of the lack of progress on reform. Saakashvili, an undoubted leader and

Georgia At the Crossroads

orator, is also regarded as a radical and populist. He is 35 years old, and is very much orientated towards the West and the United States. The Russian press has already made much of Saakashvili's negative points, perhaps because he could be viewed as a disruptive figure, creating more unrest on Russia's southern perimeter. Alternatively, could it be because he has close links with America?

Saakashvili's inflammatory style, together with his comments about the predilection for ethnic minorities in Georgia always to vote for the pro-government party, have irked Armenians in Samtske-Javakheti and Azeris in Marneuli. In his nationalism and seeming insensitivity toward minorities one is reminded of remarks made by Carl Eric Bechhofer: "*The 'Free and Independent Social-Democratic State of Georgia' will remain in my memory forever as a classic example of an imperialistic 'small nation', both in the matter of external territorial seizure and in bureaucratic tyranny within the country. Its chauvinism passes all bounds*".¹⁷ A point to be borne in mind, particularly in Tbilisi's relations with Sukhumi, Tskhinvali and Batumi at the present time. Saakashvili's views are clear:

*"Adzharia is not the property of Aslan Abashidze. For that, who considers it his property and fortress I have already prepared four walls [a prison cell]. If Abashidze wishes to take Adzharia from the structure of Georgia, then let him sit in a vehicle and drive away: from his house to the Turkish border is only a 5 minute drive ... Russia must understand that Georgia is not her vassal, and Georgians are not her slaves."*¹⁸

Nino Burdzhnadzze

Cautious and practical, possessing not only charisma but also integrity, with an ability to speak her mind in no uncertain manner, particularly where the bullying tactics of Russia are concerned, Burdzhnadzze is pro-NATO and Europe, but also wishes to clear the slate with Russia and to start afresh. In her relationship with Shevardnadze, she was not so outspoken as Saakashvili, maybe because her father owned a large bakery organisation and her husband was deputy prosecutor in Tbilisi before the elections. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of her election as Speaker was that a woman had become the second most important political person in the state. This possibly reflects a change in Georgian society, which had always been dominated by men. It should also be noted that on becoming interim president she did not choose to move into the president's office.

Zurab Zhvania

Now aged 40, Zhvania is perhaps the most experienced politician of the three. His first public appearance was as leader of the Green Party at a National Independence Movement meeting. A biology graduate from Tbilisi University, Zhvania transformed the Green Party into a serious political force. Between 1992 and 1995 he worked to create a pro-Shevardnadze majority uniting Communist, Soviet intelligentsia and young ambitious businessmen. He is more of a behind the scenes 'fixer' than an orator.

Zhvania resigned from government in 2001 because of the lack of progress on reform.

“Zurab Zhvania seems the most likely candidate for the newly created prime minister’s post, but it may turn out to be a poisoned chalice ... Over the past six years Zhvania has carved himself a reputation as a talented and ambitious politician. Supported by a team of young parliamentarians, many of whom have been educated in the West, Zhvania is seen as the figurehead of the pro-Western political faction. Zhvania, as parliamentary speaker and leader of the young reformers is widely thought to be the most likely candidate for prime minister.”¹⁹

Challenges & Dangers Facing New Government

Forthcoming Elections

One of the first challenges that the interim government has had to face concerns the dates for the Presidential elections and the re-run of the Parliamentary elections. As acting President, Burdzhnanadze was anxious to announce the date as soon as possible to show the electorate that she was only the interim president and had no intention of occupying the position any longer than the law permitted: an important point in the process of establishing stability in the country. At the first sitting of the interim government on 24 November 2003, a quorum of 158 MPs agreed that the Presidential elections would take place on 4 January 2004. 25 January 2004 has been set by the CEC as the date for a repeat of the Parliamentary elections. The position concerning the referendum is unclear, but this will probably be re-run at the same time as the Parliamentary elections.

However, Abashidze wants to delay both elections, and threatens a complete boycott of the elections by Adzharia if his terms are not met. However, it is impossible to delay the Presidential elections because of the time-frame laid down by the Constitution. Any tinkering with that date would be unwise: Burdzhnanadze is unlikely to agree with Abashidze, as was proved at her first meeting with him on 10 December in Batumi, which lasted some six hours. Commenting after the meeting, Burdzhnanadze said, *“there are many problems between the central and regional authorities, which can not be solved immediately. We, both Mr Abashidze and me, think that it is very important that this dialogue has been launched. I am ready to continue further talks.”²⁰* Abashidze also agreed that talks should continue. Many observers believe that Abashidze is trying to secure an arrangement with the central government that will permit his retention of authoritarian power in Adzharia, and Saakashvili has stated his readiness to compromise, but not at the expense of Georgia’s interests. A delay in the Parliamentary elections for up to six months might be beneficial, allowing them to go ahead in a calm, rational and considered manner. Akakiy Asatian mentioned that he,

Zurab Zhvania and Saakashvili agreed with Abashidze on this point. A boycott of the elections would be an unwise move on Abashidze's part, for he would be regarded as a loser by the people.

The main task of the new government will be to make the country governable. Large tracts of the country are outside the control of Tbilisi: "*it not only does not control the situation in Abkhazia and Pankisi, but neither in Adzharia nor Dzhavakhetia*".²¹ The future fate and shape of the country will depend on how far the government's authority runs. To ensure this, the government requires a regular supply of money from efficient taxation. The question of internally displaced persons is another intractable problem in the short to medium term.

The Georgian Economy

First in the list for a new government must be the dire state of the Georgian economy and the measures required to improve it. At the beginning of March 2002 it was announced that the World Bank was going to reduce the size of its aid programme to Georgia by 20%, from US\$130 million to US\$100 million a year from 2003,²² as a direct result of the lack of progress on rectifying the inefficiencies in fiscal management, particularly in tax collection, and the apparent inability to introduce legislation to minimise the endemic corruption in the political, business and social spheres. Box 2 provides two examples.

Box 2 - Blight of Corruption in Georgia

The Problem

Corruption has become a way of life. Faced with inefficient services people prefer to pay a little money towards hastening the service they want rather than wait the interminable time that the normal bureaucratic system would take.

Misappropriation of Funds in Energy Sector²³

The parliamentary investigation commission says some US\$300 million were misappropriated in Georgia's energy sector in the course of the last 10 years. While the government agrees with the charges, nobody is held responsible ... Georgian State security minister Valeri Khaburdzhania seems to share the opinion of MPs regarding the corrupt practices in the energy sector. Khaburdzhania said at the government's meeting on 11 December 2002 that up to US\$20 million is lost annually because of criminal activity in the system ... Meanwhile the futile debates in parliament ended in an all-too familiar an outcome: the Prosecutor General and the State Security Minister will further look into the findings of the commission. Considering quite a rich past experience this is likely to lead to nowhere. The unsinkable battleship of the Georgian energy bosses continues its journey; while the majority of Georgians are sent back into urban or rural caves without heat, without electricity, and without any hope of changes.

Electricity Meters²⁴

It helps if you know someone like Tamaz who checks meters for a local electricity company in Tbilisi. "We are supposed to cut the power if they don't pay, but there are always ways around this," he said. "You see, we understand that we have to

help each other, so every time I come to check the meters they invite me inside, give me shot of vodka with a pickle and we talk. I just turn back the meter, let them pay a small share of what they've actually used. I also get a little money, so everyone is happy."

In 2001 before the resignations of Saakashvili and Zhvania, the IMF visiting team of financial experts emphasised that various dominant groups and influential people were using their financial and political power to halt the reforms required in the country: it was precisely this need for widescale reform which Zhvania, Saakashvili and others wished to bring about. Furthermore, given the IMF's decision to bar any further disbursements to Georgia, it was unlikely to agree to release funds until the Georgian government had implemented a targeted economic policy which reflected a more realistic budget proposal, combining accurate revenue estimates and more searching improvements to the tax collection system than achieved hitherto.

One outstanding requirement for an incoming government bent on reform will be to make Abashidze in Adzharia aware of his responsibilities to discharge the tax requirements due to the central government in Tbilisi. Shevardnadze in return for support from Abashidze tended to turn a blind eye to this, with negative consequences for the Georgian economy. At the moment Tbilisi is not receiving revenue from Batumi. There is a danger that this could become an explosive issue between Tbilisi and Batumi, particularly if it adds to another area of friction between them.

Unless strong efforts are made by the new government to collect revenue due to the state, external sources of funding will not be prepared to help with financial restoration. Georgians must be prepared for a long haul: the ills associated with corruption will not be eradicated overnight.

Infrastructure

Many areas in the economy require investment and attention as a matter of urgency, including the infrastructure: roads, railways, bridges, and ports have been under heavy pressure due to increasing traffic as a result of the development of the oil industry in the Caspian. Immediate investment is needed to stop the system collapsing, for example at the ports of Poti and Supsa.

Investment is also needed in the tourist industry, which could become a major boost to the economy. During the time of the USSR some 4 million people visited Georgian and Abkhazian resorts annually. The civil war in Abkhazia destroyed 19 resorts, and now only 400,000 people visit the Black Sea coast, and only 25,000 visit the Abkhaz resorts.²⁵ In an effort to restore the tourist trade, Sukhumi has put the famous Pitsunda tourist complex out for tender, but the question of ownership could well result in lengthy court proceedings between the authorities in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. The industry

has also suffered its share of bureaucratic and financial problems, and concerns over security have not only kept the tourists away but have interfered with foreign investment. In Svaneti district there have been numerous incidents of visitors being robbed by armed gangs as a result of no-go areas where the police have lost control. Black Sea resorts outside Abkhazia are visited solely by Georgian holidaymakers with little money to spare, who rent rooms in private houses. The hotels along the coast are very expensive, so that coupled with the low level of security, service and amenities, tourists prefer to holiday in Cyprus, the Canaries, Thailand, the Seychelles or Turkey where hotels are considerably cheaper and the service much better. Another disincentive for tourists is the imposition of a visa regime between the Russian Federation and Georgia. Nevertheless, tourism has the potential for a positive future.

Constitutional Matters

The ambiguities in the Georgian Constitution are partly the cause of the continual friction between its component parts. When the Constitution was adopted in 1995 it advocated a federal system guaranteeing autonomous status for both Abkhazia and Adzharia, but no legal definition was provided for the scope and limitations of their autonomy. Vagueness abounds as to exactly where the limits of central and regional government begin and end. In 1995 the definition of limits of power were postponed pending an equitable settlement to the Abkhaz problem. Some six years later there has been no progress with the Constitution, which still remains nebulous and imprecise, enabling Adzharia and Abkhazia to take advantage of ambiguities and to fashion their own concept of a constitutional relationship with Tbilisi, or ignore it altogether.

Abkhazia

In the military operations following independence, the Abkhaz with support from volunteers from the North Caucasus and covert help from Russian forces stationed in the area, soon consolidated their control over north-west Abkhazia. The Abkhaz offensives in March and July 1993 failed to take Sukhumi and led to a ceasefire agreement, brokered, mediated and guaranteed by the Russian government. Whilst the Georgian side complied with the agreement, the Abkhaz renewed combat operations in September, taking Sukhumi, the remainder of Abkhazia and the border sectors facing Mingrelia along the Inguri River. The fall of Abkhazia was to cause a major outflow of refugees, perhaps as many as 250,000.

The stand-off has continued to the present day. It is truly amazing that Abkhazia can maintain an army when its economic and social position is today even worse than that in Georgia itself. The self-declaration of independence and the results of elections carried out without the participation of the majority of the population have not been recognised by anyone and have contradicted international practice. In the Abkhaz election on 2 March 2002, after the opposition Aitaira (Revival) and the People's Party withdrew their candidates three days before the elections, the Abkhaz

government gained complete and unrivalled control of the republic's assembly. During the past year, a large proportion of the population has sought Russian citizenship, and have received it on an individual basis without moving from their homes.

Undoubtedly the government in Tbilisi must move towards a settlement. Russian helpful and positive support is a prerequisite for solving these long-standing problems. Russian help could be limited, however as the Abkhaz received support from Chechnya in their war against Tbilisi in the early 1990s. Currently there are problems within the Abkhaz leadership which might provide a window of opportunity for Tbilisi.

South Osetia

At the present time a de facto independent South Osetia exists, it has its own government organs and even a president, but de jure no-one has recognised it. Moreover, *"To believe in the reality of its independence is difficult - one glance is sufficient on the map to understand that if it leaves Georgia, South Osetia will shine if Georgia simply falls to pieces"*.²⁶ With a minuscule population, 70,000 at the most, this "mini-republic" simply could not survive without external connections. Even with those, *"when avalanches block the pass through the mountains during the winter months, South Osetia is literally cut off from the rest of the world"*.²⁷ In economic terms many South Osetians depend on their relatives living over the Russian border in North Osetia for material support. In South Osetia itself, the population is dependent on the sale of agricultural produce, tangerines and tomatoes being the most obvious examples.

Adzharia

In Adzharia, Abashidze's concerns are directed more at the continuation of his fiefdom's freedom from interference from Tbilisi, rather than becoming an independent state. Abashidze first came into public view in 1992, when he kept Adzharia out of the conflict, and played the role of an intermediary between the Georgian military and Gamsakhurdia, which in turn helped him to create a firm power base in Batumi. Possibly it is the Gamsakhurdia experience that has caused Abashidze to become so opposed to the rhetoric of Saakashvili and led him in November 2003 to introduce a state of emergency in Adzharia, sealing it off from the rest of Georgia.

The saga of the constitutional changes of 7 July 2001 provide a prime example of a long series of challenges which the Georgian national government has had to face from Abashidze. Not having deigned to inform Tbilisi, Adzharia adopted a new constitution which included laws about the direct election of the head of the republic, whereas before he was nominated by the president of the Supreme Soviet of the Adzharian Autonomous Republic and then elected by the Supreme Soviet. A second major change was the transition to a bicameral parliament with an upper chamber of 10 senators and a lower chamber of 35 deputies. The deputies in the lower house would be elected by proportional representation, leaving open the distinct possibility that proceedings would be dominated by Abashidze's Union for Georgian Revival.

Relationships with Russia & United States of America

The relationship with Russia is one of the most important factors in Georgia's struggle for survival as a state in its present form. The Russian legacy and its overwhelming presence have tended to limit Georgian efforts and aspirations. Gas supplies to Georgia are under Russian control. A Russian utility conglomerate is in charge of providing electricity to households and industry. Following the Kremlin's more confident policy in Chechnya, will Russia's policy towards Georgia show increasing assertiveness? There are a number of indicators that could be construed as such. First, the quick deployment of the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs to Tbilisi on 23 November comes to mind. Undoubtedly, his presence did help towards solving the impasse over a seeming immovable president, thus removing an immediate threat of violence and bloodshed. Certainly this was in Russia's interests, and confirmed Russian concerns for peace, but it also continues Russia's programme of restoring its influence as a large regional power in the Caucasus.

Ivanov's quick flight to Aslan Abashidze's fiefdom probably helped to calm Abashidze's concerns. However, Abashidze's pursuit of an Adzharia insulated from Tbilisi later received a boost from Moscow with the introduction of a simplified visa regime for Adzharians, similar to the one Moscow granted some time ago to Abkhazians and South Osetians. Both this act and the meeting on 27 November 2003 with the leaders of the three Georgian autonomies can hardly be described as conducive to smooth and pleasant working relations with Tbilisi. Furthermore it bears out remarks made by Burdzhanadze in May 2002, "*Georgia has the foundations to consider that Russian politicians do not consider her [Georgia] as an equal partner, but still as a sphere of its influence.*"²⁸

The question of the removal of the two Russian bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki needs to be looked at in a more positive manner than hitherto – the offer of 10 years to remove them seems an inordinate amount of time, despite the Russian view that they do not want troops to live in tents in a ploughed field as happened in the early 1990s. The withdrawal has been agreed for several years already. A large proportion of the troops are ethnic Georgians from Batumi and ethnic Armenians in Akhalkalaki, so perhaps the accommodation problem in Russia is not so great. However, the question is not as simple as that, for the removal of Russian troops from Akhalkalaki and Batumi could well exacerbate the problems there. In the case of Akhalkalaki in particular, not only is the base a major employer, but it also offers a degree of security in the minds of local Armenians.

Carefully managed US interest and assistance may offset the overbearing and cavalier tactics of Georgia's larger neighbour to the north. As Tedo Japaridze, the new Minister for Foreign Affairs stated recently, Georgia regards the strategic partnership with the USA as one of the means to solve Georgia's most complicated problems and those associated with regional normalisation and the establishment of the country's territorial integrity.²⁹ The recent visit of Donald Rumsfeld, US Defence Secretary, underlined

Washington's readiness to continue productive and active efforts in the processes. Another aspect of Georgian policy as outlined by Japaridze was the complete normalisation of relations with Russia. A more obvious and active American presence might, paradoxically, help to achieve that goal.

Appendix 1**Chronology of Important Events from 20 November to 5 December 2003**

Date	Detail
3 Nov 03	Preliminary election results from 795 polling stations released by CEC. "For a New Georgia" in the lead. Two exit polls give favourable prognosis to Opposition bloc.
9 Nov 03	Shevardnadze and opposition leaders held first and last negotiation meeting. Shevardnadze flew to Adzharia.
9/10 Nov 03	Shevardnadze makes deal with Abashidze for support. Both appear at mass rally in Batumi. Shevardnadze authorises Abashidze to go to Yerevan, Baku and Moscow to obtain support. President Putin confirms his support for Shevardnadze by telephone.
11-15 Nov 03	Abashidze visits Yerevan and Baku where presidents of both countries confirm support for Shevardnadze. Abashidze flies to Moscow and sees head of Presidential administration Dmitriy Medved and Minister for Foreign Affairs Igor' Ivanov.
17 Nov 03	Committee of Civil Disobedience formed. Opposition leaders set in motion steps to blockade government establishments and accuse government of certain provocations.
20 Nov 03	CEC publish election results. Win for pro-presidential party "For a New Georgia".
22 Nov 03	Opposition bloc, mainly supporters of "Saakashvili-National Movement" take over and occupy Georgian Parliament building. President Shevardnadze forced to leave building. Opposition declare formation of interim government with elections within 45 days.
23 Nov 03	Shevardnadze announces resignation after talks with opposition leaders at meeting chaired by Igor' Ivanov. Igor' Ivanov flies to Batumi to see Abashidze.
24 Nov 03	Nino Burdzhaneladze, head of interim government, promises elections within 45 days. Official support announced from Washington for interim government.
24 Nov 03	President Putin remarks in Moscow that "The change of power in Georgia is a natural result of a series of systematic mistakes in internal, external and economic policy of the state".
25 Nov 03	Session of Parliament with a quorum of 158 deputies – consensus that session is an important step in avoiding constitutional crisis. Session boycotted by Abashidze and members of his party. Abashidze declares state of emergency in Adzharia. Supreme court annuls the proportional representation results. In interview with CNN Shevardnadze accepts that the election results had been falsified. However, he does not accept responsibility for the violations himself.
27 Nov 03	Triangular meeting in Moscow of Prime Minister Raul' Khadzhibia (Abkhazia), President Eduard Kokoyti (South Osetia) and Aslan Abashidze (Adzhar leader) under chairmanship of Igor Ivanov, Russian Foreign Minister.
27 Nov 03	Introduction by Moscow of simplified visa regime for Adzharians.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Perceptions*, June-August 1998, Volume III, Number 2, p43, "Security Threats in the Caucasus: Georgia's View" by Dr Aleksandr Rondeli, Director of Foreign Policy Research and Analysis Centre, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Georgia.

² <http://www.civil.ge/cgi-bin/newspro/fullnews.cgi?newsid1031040820,47411>, *Civil Georgia on-line magazine*, 3 September 2002, "Alex Rondeli: Russia Should Try to Generate Some Trust".

³ *IASPS Policy Briefings and Geostrategic Perspectives*, No 39, 21 November 2003, p1, "Georgian Elections and Aftermath: Chaotic Pluralism in a Weak State" by Vladimir Socov, IASPS Senior Fellow.

⁴ BBC Monitoring – Georgian Parliamentary Election Guide, 2 November 2003.

⁵ "Tsentral'naya Azia i Kavkas", No 6 (18), 2001, p82, "Osobennosti Politicheskogo Protsesa v Postsovetskoj Gryzii" by David Berdzenishvili, Chairman of the National Committee of the Republican Party of Georgia and Fridon Sakvarelidze, member of the National Committee of the Republican Party of Georgia.

⁶ <http://vip.lenta.ru/fullstory/2003/11/06/georgia>, VIP Lenta.Ru, 6 November 2003, p1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ BBC Monitoring – Georgian Parliamentary Election Guide, 2 November 2003, p5.

⁹ http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-11-04/5_georgia.html, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 238, 4 November 2003, "Glavnyy priz – Parlamentskoye bol'shinstvo" by Eteri Kakabadze.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <http://www.rosbaltnews.com/2003/11/24/64815.html>, Rosbalt News Agency, 20 November 2003, "Georgian Central Elections Committee Confirms Results According to Proportional Representation", Tbilisi, 20 November 2003.

¹² <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Collections/Slavic/army0401.html>, *Army and Society in Georgia*, April-May 2001, p3, "Crisis Management Strategy in Georgia" by Tamara Pataraiia.

¹³ <http://www.nns.ru/interv/arch/2002/06/26/int7703.html>, pp1-2. "Even little children know about this. The fact of the matter is that the Shevardnadze clan which includes his wife, close relatives and friends (approximately 30 people) controls the economy of the country. For example, the President's son-in-law controls telecommunications. The mining kombinat, extracting gold, the ferro-alloy factory are all under the families' control. A kinsman of the President, Nugzar Shevardnadze controls all the oil production products. Suffice to say that today he has taken charge the Georgian branches of Coca-Cola and Macdonalds, having expelled the legal shareholders. The President's brother-in-law directs the port of Poti, in addition to owning the Rustavi factory "Azot". And it's possible to continue this list. All the real economy of Georgia today works only for the bottomless pocket of the Shevardnadze clan."

¹⁴ http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200108_94_1_eng.txt, CRS, No 94, 17 August 2001, p1, "Georgia's Culture of Graft" by Zaal Andjaparidze.

¹⁵ http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200104_80_02_eng.txt, CRS, No 80, 30 April 2001, p2.

¹⁶ http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200109_99_2_eng.txt, CRS, No 99, 25 September 2001, p3.

¹⁷ C E Bechhofer, "In Denikin's Russia and the Caucasus 1919-1920", London, 1921, p14.

- ¹⁸ <http://www.nns.ru/chronicle/index.html>, NSN: Temy dnya, 10/1 20:50, "Saakashvili napravil Abashidze v Turtsiyu".
- ¹⁹ http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200104_80_02_eng.txt, CRS, No 80, 30 April 2001, "Shevardnadze political balancing act" by Jaba Devdarian, founder of the United Nations Association of Georgia and a Fellow at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, USA.
- ²⁰ <http://207.218.249.154/cgi-bin/eng/print.pl?id=5784>, *Online Magazine - Civil Georgia*, 10 December 2003, "No Deal after Batumi Talks" by Giorgi Sepashvili.
- ²¹ <http://gazetasng.ru/article.cgi?id=30007>, GazetaCNG.RU, 27 February 2002, "Pankisi kak orudiye informatsionnoy voyny" by Aleksandr Orlov.
- ²² http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200203_120_3_eng.txt, CRS, No 120, 15 March 2002.
- ²³ <http://www.civil.ge/cgi-bin/newspro/fullnews.cgi?newsid1040019486,23504>, *Civil Georgia on-line Magazine*, 17 December 2002, "Shortcut in the Mains" by Nino Khutsidze.
- ²⁴ http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200111_107_3_eng.txt, CRS, No 127, 27 November 2001, "Lights Go Out Over Georgia" by Marina Rennau, IWPR project coordinator in Tbilisi.
- ²⁵ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 123, 24 June 2002, p11.
- ²⁶ *Tsentrāl'naya Aziya i Kavkaz*, No 6 (18), 2001, p66, "Put'k stabil'nomu khaosu" by Ivlian Khaindrava.
- ²⁷ Institute of War and Peace Reporting No 59, 24 November 2002, "South Osetia Faces Isolation" by Valeriy Dzutsev.
- ²⁸ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 96, 21 May 2002, p11, "Nino Burdzhnadarze: Rossiya iskustvenno i tselenapravlenno ottorgayet Gruziyuot sebya" by Besik Pipiya.
- ²⁹ <http://www.gzt.ru/rub.gzt/rubric=novosti&id5305000000006182>, GZT.ru, 11 December 2003, "Chto vazhnee dlya Rossii".

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-904423-55-8

Published By:

Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Haig Road
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone: (44) 1276 412995

Fax: (44) 1276 686880

E-mail: csrc@defenceacademy.mod.uk

<http://www.csrc.ac.uk>

ISBN 1-904423-55-8