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After the Revolution

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‘The table is full, the wall is painted, the space is filled with voices!’ Zurab was talking. We were in a Mexican-Japanese restaurant in Tbilisi, ending a heavy night. Bottles and dishes crowded the table; the diners were even gaudier than the décor; over the blast of the band came the voice of Georgia’s richest brewer yelling at his bodyguards. ‘I’m talking about Georgia,’ Zurab shouted. God, not more Kakheti red wine?

A thin young woman with an escort of men in black leather jackets came over to give him a kiss. ‘Know who that was? Edward Shevardnadze’s granddaughter. She’s in TV news. And you know who directed that fantastic shot – the look on Shevy’s face as Misha Saakashvili burst into the parliament chamber with the crowd: the disbelief, the fear, the sag? She did. Her own grandfather.’

Emptiness is what Georgians hate, whether in the form of darkness, hunger, isolation or silence. What is life worth if the table is too bare to feed strangers, or if the wall is blank white with no blaze of mad political posters and graffiti, or if women don’t push away their empty plates and start singing, or if the world stops talking about Georgia? But this time is anything but empty. For one thing, the lights are on in Tbilisi and the heating works. The last time I was here, seven years ago, people were reading by candlelight and spent much of the winter in bed with scarves round their necks. This is the first winter when gas and electricity have been on most of the time. True, the whole country went black a few days before Saakashvili’s inauguration as president (a fault at the Inguri hydroelectric dam far off in the mountains). True, the plane approaching Tbilisi glides over villages still dark but for the odd oil-lamp glimmer. And all too true that the reason the supply is regular is that it is now owned by Russian companies, which bought over Georgian companies after privatisation.

The Georgians reflect that the big hand which switches on can also switch off. One of the things they love about Saakashvili is that he says loudly and recklessly what everyone thinks. As he told *Le Monde* the other day, ‘Nobody but the Russians wanted to buy the companies. I

have no objection in principle to Russian investments. But the fact is that they still come with a certain rhetoric about the return of Russian imperialism. And that sort of talk bothers us a lot.'

Mikheil Saakashvili is 36 years old, dark and already a bit *joufflu*, wildly talkative and often indiscreet. His own rhetoric is ebullient. He will break down Georgia's monstrous corruption, bring order to the chaos of state finances, set the nation on a course towards the European Union, get rid of the Russian military bases, deal (we don't yet know how) with the ten-year-old secession of Abkhazia. At the presidential election on 4 January (clean, barring irregularities described by foreign observers as 'frequent but not systematic'), he got 97 per cent of the votes on an 83 per cent turnout. Everybody wants to share his optimism, and to believe in their own vaulting expectations. But Georgians have seen a lot of false dawns. Their deepest expectation, currently repressed, is that their expectations will be disappointed. They talk lovingly about 'our baby president' and his pretty Dutch wife, Sandra, who has learned Georgian. But they want to see results as well as words.

The 'revolution of roses' on 22 November was a hybrid of spontaneity and careful preparation. Georgians remain furious about an article in the *Guardian* which described it as a Western-organised coup, 'a well-planned drama starring Saakashvili from American casting', in which the people of Georgia were no more than extras or guests at a gigantic street party. So was it no more than 'regime-change lite', a portable recipe for installing pro-Western governments which had been financed by George Soros and field-tested in Belgrade? That is a travesty. Most revolutions are just such a mix of well-trained activists and crowds joining street demonstrations, events which involve relatively few people in a capital city but which are then overwhelmingly endorsed by millions who were not present. The lessons of the storming of the Serbian parliament were closely studied by Saakashvili and his friends and advisers, and they counted on the diplomatic support of the West before and after they acted. But the revolutions of 1848, and some of those in 1989, were little different. First the handful in a city centre, then the hesitating masses. Wasn't it a Georgian peasant who told a pollster: 'Of course I support the opposition – from the moment they get into power'?

And the November rebels were taking real risks. Political change without violence is rare in Georgia. This was the first bloodless revolution in Tbilisi, a city which has been burned down forty times in its history. The demonstrations in April 1989 ended when 23 people, most of them women, were butchered on the parliament steps by Soviet special troops wielding sharpened spades (the horrible tool used to suppress revolts in the Gulag). The declaration of independence in 1991 was followed by a putsch and two weeks of heavy fighting in the city centre. When Saakashvili and his followers burst through the parliament doors in November he was wearing a flak jacket under his coat, but it was a red rose, not an AK-47, that he flourished in front of him.

Shevardnadze, tired and cynical but still wise, could have used gunmen to stop him but chose not to. All the same, the danger from Saakashvili's other enemies is very far from over. He is going after the great thieves, many of them with armed gangs and up-country clans to call on, who have grown used to having their own way with state revenues for many years. That Belgrade model has its dark side, and everyone in Georgia remembers what happened to the new Serbian prime minister, Zoran Djindjic', murdered in broad daylight by gunmen acting for a coalition of organised crime and the secret police. Shevardnadze himself narrowly survived several assassination attempts, including a car bomb in the parliament courtyard in 1995. His admirers pray that Saakashvili's bodyguards know their job – and have been well screened.

They pray too for the new 30-year-old public prosecutor, Irakli Okruashvili. He has made a bold start, and some spectacular arrests have cheered the nation. The head of the railways, Akaki Chkhaidze, was snatched by helicopter as he tried to hide in the semi-autonomous region of Ajara, reputedly with \$6 million on him. The boss of the sports administration was caught at the airport and must answer questions about football transfer fees and foreign bank accounts. A Post Office Bank director was arrested, allegedly for embezzling \$250,000 from funds meant for the refugees who fled from Abkhazia after its secession war in 1993 (another \$600,000 was intercepted before he could pay it into his account). David Mirtskhulava, the former minister of energy, had a mild heart attack when he was charged with pocketing \$6 million on its way to pay Georgia's bill for electricity imports.

Georgia is not a sprawling continent, but a poor, steep country about the same size as Scotland and with the same population. To put the amounts appropriated in proportion, an average university professor in Georgia earns about \$15 a month – assuming that the salary cheque arrives. Teachers wait so long for their wretched earnings that they can only live by charging their pupils for private lessons. Pensions have not been paid since early in 2003. In the Gori district, west of Tbilisi, the doctors have had no money since June. Neither, in many areas, have the Abkhazian refugees. When their dole does get through, it comes to \$5 a month. Near Zugdidi, in western Georgia, I drove through an angry crowd of refugees preparing to sit down and block the main road to Tbilisi until they got their money. A few hours later, they captured the new minister for refugees and held her hostage.

The arrests and the seizures of looted cash are exciting. And yet in other, more fundamental ways the new regime is moving with surprising caution. In the weeks after the fall of Shevardnadze, people all over Georgia prepared to rise and repeat the Tbilisi coup in their own towns and cities, evicting the old authorities and replacing them with honest men and women. But the Saakashvili team ordered them to go home. Spontaneous revolution was the last thing they wanted. Even an attempt to dethrone the rector of the university in Tbilisi was

blocked. The Kmara! movement (the word means ‘Enough!’ and Kmara! people were the devoted core of the demonstrations against Shevardnadze) forced him to resign. But then a group of university teachers, apparently egged on by the government, protested against this ‘interference with academic freedom’, and he withdrew his resignation.

A huge head of steam has been created. But the new regime is unwilling to use it. I went to see Ghia Nodia, of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, who has become one of Saakashvili’s close policy advisers. How could Georgia be transformed, I asked, if the government refused to mobilise popular enthusiasm and lead it against the old system? The bureaucracy, bribe-happy and demoralised, could hardly be used to purge and reform itself. Saakashvili leads a party, the National Movement, but it bears no resemblance to the sort of party which the Communist Party had been – an instrument that could be used to impose new policies throughout a nation. So, if he was not prepared to enlist ‘the people’ in the work of transformation, what other force could he rely on?

‘It’s true that the opposition leaders stopped local people invading their public buildings,’ Nodia said. ‘They wanted stability. I think that was right. They had to think about what might happen if they were seen to be encouraging the overthrow of those in power in the ethnic minority regions, where many people don’t speak Georgian – in the Armenian area, for instance. Real trouble could have followed; the bosses in such places have only been playing at democracy so far. And there were fears that it would become a revolution in which the rich were attacked merely for being rich and not for provable cases of corruption.’

The two priorities, he went on, were fighting corruption and rescuing state finances. Until money was raised, by recovering stolen funds but above all by extracting the millions in unpaid taxes owed to the treasury, Saakashvili’s government could not make good its promise to resume payments, not only to pensioners and destitute refugees but to the teachers, doctors, soldiers and civil servants who are supposed to run the nation. I asked Nodia how a deeply corrupt police force and fiscal service could be expected to root out bribery and collect unpaid taxes if they weren’t themselves screened, purged and retrained. And where was the time to do all that retraining?

‘The public services must be made to function again,’ he said. ‘Most of the economy was privatised some years ago. But there have to be rules even for private business. We do have competition, but it is lawless and grossly unfair. Instead of regular taxation, we have “grey” taxation extorted by criminals. In that sense, privatisation went much too far, and now people have lost the sense of public responsibility. Retraining? Unfortunately, we have to use the agencies which we have inherited.’ Leaving Nodia, I felt that Saakashvili had scarcely thought at all about the means to get to his goal. He might as well be rushing off to climb the 15,000 feet of Mount Kazbegi in a pair of Gucci moccasins.

One morning, I climbed up St David's Mountain. Here is the most touching of romantic shrines. In a grotto below an ancient church lies the tomb of Alexander Griboyedov, the author of *Woe from Wit* and the inventor of the original angry young man, the unhappy Chatsky. Beside him is his wife, the Georgian princess Nino Chavchavadze. Griboyedov married her in 1828, when she was 16. But only a few months later he was killed, torn to pieces by a Shiite mob outside the Russian embassy in Tehran. A hooded Nino in white marble clings to a cross on her husband's grave. 'Your works will never be forgotten, but why must your Nino's love survive you?'

Griboyedov believed that an intellectual must also be a man of action, ready to take up the sword as well as the pen. He had made Chatsky say: 'I would love to serve, but I am sickened by servility!' For Griboyedov, this dilemma was solved by choosing to be a diplomat in the service of a tsar he openly despised. This stylish gesture and his Orphic death made him a model for others, not least for Conor Cruise O'Brien, who wrote *Maria Cross*, became Ireland's ambassador at the United Nations and led UN troops into battle in Katanga. I remember O'Brien climbing onto a table in the staff club of Edinburgh University, after a majestic lunch, and shouting: 'I am Griboyedov!' But luckier.

I stood looking out over Tbilisi and getting my breath. It was 16 years since I had last done this climb, and the hill seemed much steeper now. Georgia in those days was still a republic of the Soviet Union, bound and gagged politically but enjoying a huge cultural revival. Georgians were making stupendous films; the Rustaveli Theatre's production of *Richard III* pulverised Edinburgh audiences who understood not a word of the language. The nation was rediscovering its past, and falling in love with what it discovered. One favourite anecdote told of a senior Georgian Communist who was expelled from the party for applying for a passport to Israel. He told the control commission that he had wanted to translate into Hebrew the work of the 12th-century national poet Shota Rustaveli – 'to take it from the oldest and purest language on earth to the second oldest and purest'. The commission burst into tears. Weeping, they signed the order for his expulsion, but then formed a double line to kiss and embrace him as he left the hall.

A Moscow friend told me then: 'Georgia is far the best and strongest republic; no other has such cultural energy.' It was a tolerant place, where the Orthodox Christian majority lived at peace with its small Muslim minorities (as it still does). And the Georgians lived better than anyone else, selling their overflowing surplus of subtropical fruit, vegetables, wine and brandy in all the markets of Russia. If the Soviet Union ever ended (a dim fantasy which in fact was only four years off), one thing was certain: everyone else might starve, but Georgia would be just fine.

It was a certainty, and it was absolutely wrong. Economically, independence brought

catastrophe to the three nations of the Caucasus: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The planned, integrated industry of the Soviet Union collapsed. When I returned, nine years later, every city was entered through a nightmare avenue of dead and rusting factories. And the market for Georgian produce collapsed, too, as the ruble died and Russian families ran out of cash. The continental power grid flickered and blacked out. The winters of candlelight and sleeping in overcoats began.

With poverty came war. The first president, the erratic archaeologist and nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was overthrown in a putsch in late 1991. He tried unsuccessfully to regain power in 1993, and civil war devastated his home territory of Mingrelia in western Georgia. By now, much of the country was in the hands of warlords with private armies. Shevardnadze, who had been Gorbachev's foreign minister, became head of state in 1992 and began to reassert central authority, but came too late to head off the Abkhazian disaster. Although he handled that crisis stupidly, making bad worse, the war had already been touched off by some of Georgia's most notorious thugs, above all by Tengis Kitovani, who had made himself minister of defence.

Like the ghastly Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Abkhazian war could easily have been avoided. In brief, Abkhazia is a small, exquisite territory on the Black Sea coast, the summer resort of privileged Russians from tsarist princesses to Gorbachev. Its few towns had always been cosmopolitan, and there were big Greek, Jewish and Russian minorities, but during the Soviet period Abkhazia's native inhabitants became outnumbered by Georgian and Mingrelian settlers. Soviet constitutional policy was unpredictable; sometimes the place ranked as an 'independent' national republic, and at other times it was incorporated within Georgia. But by the time the USSR fell apart, Abkhazia had become an 'autonomous republic' within the Soviet Republic of Georgia.

All this semi-fictional taxonomy now began to melt in the heat of new realities. The Abkhazians, with their own Communist Party controlling culture and education, had been trying to reduce Georgian influence and 'Abkhanise' the bureaucracy for some years. Now, as the USSR weakened, they realised that Georgia would inevitably declare full independence and claim Abkhazia as part of its sovereign territory. The Abkhazian leaders countered by demanding equal autonomy to Georgia.

Sane, confident statesmen might have sorted this out with some 'confederacy' deal. But paranoia and mistrust ruled. After a period of violent demonstrations, Kitovani (who was less than sane) plunged into Abkhazia with a Georgian militia force in August 1992 and seized the capital, Sukhumi. Fighting began, soon to become all-out war as the Abkhazians were supported by Russian equipment and aircraft and by bands of north Caucasian warriors. There were atrocities against civilians on both sides. The war ended in 1993 with the total

roust of the Georgian army, and the flight of more than 200,000 Georgian and Mingrelian refugees into Georgia. Shevardnadze himself appeared in Sukhumi in a steel helmet, trying to rally his forces at the last moment, and only escaped by the skin of his teeth. Ten years on, the refugees remain, furious and destitute. They have not been absorbed into Georgian society and still cling on in derelict factories, abandoned Soviet bases and slum hotels.

The dire result of these conflicts was that Russia gained a new grip over the region. In 1993, Russian troops saved Shevardnadze from Gamzakhurdia's rebellion, but at a price: Georgia was made to join the post-Soviet Confederation of Independent States (CIS) and accept Russian military bases. The Abkhazian war ended with a Russian peacekeeping force occupying the frontier zone with Georgia, while Abkhazia itself – independent but isolated – became in many ways a Russian dependency.

This is the rubble which Saakashvili has to clear, if he is to change the geopolitics of the Caucasus, Westernise Georgia and set it on a track which leads towards the European Union – or at least towards its structures and standards (it's difficult to know whether the EU could one day contemplate Georgian membership). The Russians must be induced to back off, evacuating their two remaining bases in the country, and a settlement must be reached with Abkhazia in the teeth of Russian obstructions. This is the second birth of Georgian independence, given that the version fathered by Gamzakhurdia in 1991 turned out so weak and deformed. To me, these two men seem to personify Tom Nairn's image of nationalism as a 'Janus figure': a statue with one face staring backwards and inwards towards the mythical past and lost golden ages, while the other looks forward and outwards into a modernising future in which national independence is the condition for joining the outside world. But to many Georgians, including those who voted for Saakashvili, their identity is essentialist. They nurse the icon of an eternal ethnic Georgia whose cultural and political continuity stretches back unbroken to the Bronze Age and probably beyond. This is the 'Zviadist vision' to which that tragic, zigzag antiquary appealed, and it is far too deeply rooted to be simply swept away by the pragmatic Saakashvili.

Georgia in Europe? The phrase is thrilling, and yet it stirs complicated unease in many Georgians. Would 'becoming European' mean abandoning the uniqueness of Georgia, open for millennia not only to the Christian West but also to the cultures of Persia, Turkey and all the other Muslim civilisations of western Asia?

The great museum is very dark and very cold. It is Monday, the day when it closes to the public, and the staff are trying to save money. Half-seen in a corner of the lobby, three watchmen in greatcoats crouch over a brazier. But upstairs, the two rooms where David Lordkipanidze works are warm and bright.

On his table is a new picture-book in French. *La Géorgie: Berceau des Européens*. He is one

of the authors. Next to it lie two small, extraordinary objects made of crystal-transparent plastic. They are miniature casts of two of the Dmanisi skulls, the crania of hominids who lived in what is now Georgia some 1.7 million years ago. Their discovery in the past few years – the latest, astonishingly complete little skull emerged in 2002 – has changed our understanding of human origins. Before Dmanisi, it was assumed that early humans – *Homo erectus* – began to migrate out of Africa only when they had acquired larger brains and the relatively advanced Acheulian hand-axe toolkit. Now it appears that the move was earlier and faster. The Dmanisi people had brains no bigger than the Oldowan hominids found in East Africa and used the same simple ‘pebble-chopper’ tools.

Hundreds of these tools – little more than splintered stones – have been found at Dmanisi, among the bones of sabre-toothed tigers, elephants and other Pleistocene species. In the 1930s, archaeologists started excavating a feudal fortress at the site; it was not until 1982 that a rhinoceros tooth was noticed among the remains of supposedly medieval feasting. Soon human bones were found, and in 1999 two almost complete skulls were excavated from beneath a sealing layer of limestone by the palaeontologist Leo Gabunia. A third skull was so small that at first it was thought to belong to a different species of *Homo*. Today it is thought that the Dmanisi people contained wide physical variation and, perhaps, that their sexual dimorphism produced females far tinier than the males.

By now Professor Lordkipanidze had taken over from the older Gabunia. His name is a famous one in Georgia: his father, the archaeologist Otar Lordkipanidze, was the excavator of the fabulous gold treasures from the Iron Age temple-city of Vani, in western Georgia. Gazing at their opulence, and the minute delicacy of their decoration, Georgians grew more convinced than ever that the Golden Fleece was more than a fairytale and that the kingdom of Colchis, from which Jason stole Medea and the Fleece, had been the direct ancestor of the modern state of Georgia.

In this way, father and son revealed once again those Janus-faces of nationalism. The father brought to light that golden age in which his countrymen had always passionately believed (although foreign scholars sometimes mutter that Georgian archaeology exaggerates the glory that was Colchis, and underplays the wealth, power and influence of the Greek colonies along the Black Sea coast). The son, a tall and formidably charming man, is developing the remoter past into an avenue towards Europe and the outside world. Admittedly, to call the Dmanisi site ‘the cradle of the Europeans’ is pushing it. Politicians may rejoice at the phrase, especially in France, where President Chirac is said to be ardent about ‘proto-European’ Dmanisi, but palaeontologists turn slightly pale. There is no evidence that these little creatures were about to chip and scavenge their way westwards towards Paris and Brussels. Their descendants may just as well have mooched eastwards into Iran and Asia. But whatever the truth may turn out to be, Lordkipanidze sees the discovery as an incredible

cultural windfall for his country, an opportunity not to be missed.

‘Dmanisi has given Europe a chance to claim a part in human beginnings: before, they were set only in Africa. And this is also a big chance for Georgia, a stroke of luck. We have the Golden Fleece story, and now we have this "First Europeans" story.’ Lordkipanidze has moved rapidly and successfully to turn Dmanisi into an international operation under Georgian leadership; 11 American universities are now among the scientific centres all over the world which are co-operating on-site and in their home laboratories to open the site further and interpret its results. Funding comes from many sources, especially from the National Geographic Society in the US. But Lordkipanidze is determined that Georgia will gain more than celebrity and propaganda from Dmanisi. He is using it to establish in Georgia a well-funded, world-standard centre of research and a cadre of first-class scientists in all the disciplines which make up palaeontology. ‘It’s highly important for the Georgian state that we don’t just import foreign scientists to work on our past, as African countries do.’ Foreign participants are obliged to train Georgians up to their own standards – and then send them back to work in their own country. ‘We have to make products which the world wants, and now we can produce scientific excellence. We must show our government that scientists are not parasites. We are bringing people and money into Georgia.’

In the museum’s main hall, a single light glows over the reconstructed faces of a man and a woman, and over the full-sized casts of their skulls. The faces have humble, eager expressions, as if they were impatient to perform in whatever miracle-play of origins the Georgians have scripted for them. The skulls themselves have almost perfect teeth (their lives were short). But their eye-orbits are hostile black tunnels leading back into the unknown. I saw them in several dreams later that week, their double-barrelled darkness trained on me.

Someone who has doubts about ‘Georgia in Europe’ is the young novelist Dato Turashvili. I met him in one of the crowded café-bookshops which have sprung up in Tbilisi, sitting at a table where customers were donating second-hand books for prison libraries. Turashvili is a Scotophile. He was one of the stars at a recent Edinburgh Book Festival and is a friend of Irvine Welsh. He wears an outsize cloth cap, chocolate-coloured, at all times.

Turashvili said that it would be a cultural disaster if Georgia decided to follow the fashion and fancy itself a European nation – which, to him, is a euphemism for the acceptance of total Americanisation. At this, another writer standing nearby gave a shy smile, and pulled up his jersey to show a T-shirt inscribed ‘Fuck Bush’. Turashvili went on: ‘What I dread is Georgia signing up to an American-ruled West whose creed is anti-Islamic and built on the idea of inevitable culture-clash. This would be utterly wrong for Georgia. Our identity is intimate with the Muslim world, and especially with Iran and Persian civilisation.’ To show me what he meant, he pulled his latest book from a shelf: *Gurdzi-Khatuni*, a delicately illustrated

children's picture-book, which tells the story of the Georgian princess Tamara, who was forced to marry a sultan of the Seljuk Turks. This wasn't at all the sort of book I had supposed Turashvili wrote. But he explained: 'She brought our peoples closer together, and made the life of the Georgians under foreign conquerors a little easier. She learned to live in a new way and enjoy it. Yes, she even took the founder of the Sufi faith as her lover.'

A few nights later, he invited me back to the café for a talk with writers about the state of Scottish literature. A gallon bottle of Johnnie Walker stood on the counter, free to all comers. A TV camera poked through the smoke clouds. Everybody was shouting. Somebody made a remark about Irvine Welsh, and got harangued in Georgian by Turashvili. Somebody else asked: 'Do good books go unpublished in Scotland, like in Georgia?' ('Her books are boring and unreadable,' said a voice in my ear.) Critics were all crap, and publishers only thought about money. And then: 'Why do people like you go on about Europe? Why should we be "European" when our identity is part Asian?'

The whole Transcaucasus has been a place of richly mingled identities, religions and ethnicities. But in the late 20th century, it began to fragment. After independence in 1991, Armenians, Muslim Azeris and Georgians were all (in different degrees of intensity) infected by the disease which often follows liberation in ancient multicultural societies: exclusiveness. The external pressure comes off – in this case, Russian and then Soviet power – and suddenly people who have lived together in something like peace for centuries find that they cannot bear to live together any more.

In the Caucasus, the Armenians expelled their Azeris, the Azeris expelled their Armenians and the Abkhazians chased out their Georgians. The whole Caucasus, its economy already dying, buckled under the weight of nearly two million refugees. Most of the Jewish and Greek minorities meanwhile departed for 'their own' countries, which their ancestors had left millennia before and whose languages they seldom spoke. The frontiers between the three new states often became cease-fire lines, manned by UN or Russian troops. But now, especially in the last five years, a new phase of disintegration has begun, as America and Russia compete for influence over the oil and gas reserves around the Caspian Sea. This means new wealth, and Baku in Azerbaijan has again become the oil cosmopolis it was in the early 20th century; but it also means renewed great-power competition for political hegemony over the region. So far, the Americans are winning in Georgia and Azerbaijan. (Armenia, with no energy resources and not on the route of any strategic pipeline, is almost ignored.)

The return of Russia is what the Georgians most dread, but they do not wish to be an American protectorate, either. In the wonderful novel *Ali and Nino*, published in 1937 by 'Kurban Said', whose real name seems to have been Lev Nussenbaum, an Armenian speaks

to the Georgian princess Nino and the Azeri warrior-prince Ali. The passage is set in about 1915, and the novel's theme is the courtship and marriage of two young people whose love overcomes all the familial and religious barriers which separate them. Its subtext, not hard to read, is that only foreign interference prevents the peoples of the Caucasus from living together in peace. The Russians

pretend that they will protect us, one against the other. Therefore Russian regiments are here, Russian civil servants and governors. But, Princess, say for yourself: do you have to be protected from me? Must I be protected from Ali Khan? Were we not, all of us, sitting peacefully together near the fountain of Pechapür? Surely the time is past when the Caucasian peoples had to think of Persia as an enemy. The enemy is in the north, and this same enemy is trying to tell us that we are children, who have to be protected from each other. But we are not children; we have been grown-up for quite some time.

In the novel, this speech carries a terrible irony. The Armenian later tries to abduct Nino in his sleek English car, only to be pursued on horseback and murdered by Ali Khan. And Ali himself dies on a battlefield as his forefathers have died, defending Azerbaijan against the Bolshevik invasion in 1921. Georgians rediscovered this book only a few years ago, but they find its message profoundly appealing. At Prospero's bookshop in the centre of Tbilisi, stacks of the latest English-language edition are selling fast.

Saakashvili spent 25 January, the day of his presidential inauguration, in violent motion. The day before the ceremony in Tbilisi, which was attended by statesmen from all over the world, he had flown to the Gelati monastery near Georgia's old capital, Kutaisi. There he paid homage at the grave of King David the Builder (1089-1125), conqueror of the Turks and founder of a single Georgian kingdom reaching from the Black Sea to the Caspian. Saakashvili swore to achieve 'integrity, reconstruction, unification' for Georgia.

On the inauguration day itself, he demonstrated this commitment to integrity and unity by suddenly arriving in the autonomous province of Ajara, down in the south-east corner of the Black Sea. Ajara is now the most urgent priority in Saakashvili's drive to establish his authority. A rich, subtropical region where banana palms flourish in warm, perpetual rain, Ajara has a mainly Muslim population, and for many years it has been the semi-independent fiefdom of its 'president', Aslan Abashidze. This affable rogue – who runs a corrupt autocracy, financing himself and his family by refusing to hand on tax revenues to central government – has been edging towards secession. The problem about removing him is that Russia, with one of its remaining military bases at Batumi, the Ajarian capital, has a finger in this pie and has protected Abashidze repeatedly against efforts by Tbilisi to re-establish control.

Saakashvili spent only a few hours in Batumi, long enough to accompany Abashidze on the inspection of a parade and to hear the loyal chants of a crowd hurriedly marshalled for the occasion. More distantly, he could hear the shouts of Ajarians who took a different view and demanded democracy and a 'revolution of roses' in their own province. At the time of writing, Abashidze is still trying to deal with these dissenters by threats, arrests and police batons. But in Tbilisi there is a feeling that his time is running out. It's rumoured that he has already offered to pay back half the \$10 million he is thought to have embezzled from taxes. Even the Russians must be tempted to cut their losses and fly Abashidze and his clan to some cosy villa near Moscow. The danger – a real one, in this passionate country – is that the demonstrations will get out of control, that Abashidze will panic and that there will be bloodshed in the streets of Batumi. That would be a pretext for Russian military intervention.

Even if Ajara can be regained, two other secessions remain. One is South Ossetia. Here, in the foothills of the Caucasus ranges, lives a small ethnic minority: the Ossetes speak an Indo-Iranian language, and are thought to descend from Sarmatian nomads. They fought a war for independence, and for the right to join Northern Ossetia across the Russian frontier, which fizzled out in 1992, and although Tbilisi's writ does not run in South Ossetia, people cross the cease-fire line freely and the conflict seems dormant. But the other secession is by far the most important and intractable. This is Abkhazia.

The UN helicopter swings out over the Black Sea on its journey to Sukhumi, to avoid flying over the troubled border region of Gali where there is still occasional gunfire. The Abkhaz coast appears, fringed with palms, oleanders and groves of eucalyptus trees planted long ago by the Russians to dry out the malarial marshes. Behind the coastline lies a bank of woolly cloud. And suddenly, halfway up the sky, emerge the dazzling silver peaks of the High Caucasus. Part of Abkhazia's problem is that too many people love it.

For Russians and for Georgians, this coast has been emotionally 'theirs', the place of long, delicious summers far from mud and snow and bureaucracy. Tsarist generals retired to build Palladian beach resorts at Gagra or Sukhumi; the Soviet nomenklatura built enormous white villas at Pitsunda or Gudauta; generations of Georgians came here to spend family holidays, fall in love, write books and discover the beauty of a land they regarded as an extension of Georgia. In the few towns and along the seaside, the languages heard were Russian or Georgian. If the visitors were aware of the Abkhazians at all, they thought of them as a picturesque race of free villagers, speaking a strange North Caucasian tongue and living up in the foothills.

Sukhum (the Abkhazians never use the Georgian form 'Sukhumi') is desperately quiet today. You can wander down a main boulevard leading to the sea-front esplanade, and the only sound is a football being bounced by children against a tree. The odd car passes, and every

few minutes a *marshrutka* (a mini-van collective taxi) jolts over the potholes. Ten years after Abkhazia's victory, something like a quarter of central Sukhum's buildings remain gutted.

I was last here in 1994, nine months after the end of the war. The town still stank of fire; there were shell-craters in the streets and the fresh graves of soldiers in the parks. Since then, many ruins have been cleared and some of the prettiest classical buildings restored. The graves have been replaced by a modernist war memorial with tablets listing the names of the dead. There are shops, selling goods imported from Russia or Turkey, and a variety of small restaurants and cafés. The days when town workers lived on food parcels sent by village relatives have been forgotten. It's normality, but a very low-level normality.

The Abkhazians had hoped to join the world. Instead, they were expelled from it. At first, all communications with the outside – rail, air, sea and most telephone lines – were severed. The odd Turkish vessel with vital supplies was allowed into Sukhum, but the frontiers were sealed to passenger traffic and the Abkhazians became silent prisoners in their own unrecognised country. A small United Nations force, unomig, settled in to observe the cease-fire zone on the border with Georgia. The Russians, although they had helped Abkhazia to win the war, now enforced the blockade. Labelled as 'CIS peacekeepers', Russian troops had occupied the cease-fire zone since the fighting ended. Nobody doubted that this was a way of keeping Georgia under pressure and reducing the reality of its independence.

The blockade is no longer total. Russian and Ukrainian entrepreneurs have leased and repaired some of the hotels, and thousands of Russian holidaymakers came to Abkhazia last summer. Coal, tangerines and tobacco are exported again, and goods – including black market petrol – come in across the northern border with Russia. And travel is becoming possible. For a wad of dollars, Turkish fishermen have always been prepared to smuggle a passenger from Sukhum across to Trabzon. In 2002, Russia offered to exchange old Soviet passports for new Russian ones, allowing Abkhazians to travel to Moscow and apply for visas to the rest of the world. Last year, the railway between Sukhum and Russia was reopened.

These changes infuriated the Georgians, who insist that there should be no relaxations in the blockade without Abkhazian political concessions. But for ten years, negotiations at many levels and in many places have dragged on with no perceptible result – blocked over the return of refugees and Abkhazia's future relationship to Georgia, but above all by Russia's talent for stalling the talks whenever a gleam of agreement appeared. In 1999, the Abkhaz government lost patience and declared full independence. This made a solution even more difficult, though nobody recognised Abkhazia except for two other non-states: Nagorny Karabakh and the Transnistrian Republic in Moldova.

But now, after the Georgian revolution, could things change? The attitudes of some Georgians have softened over the last few years. People who used to shout that the

Abkhazians were no more than a handful of Islamic fundamentalists, or Russian stooges posing as aboriginals, now reluctantly accept that Abkhazia has an identity which has to be taken into account. Saakashvili says that he wants to solve the Abkhazia problem. He gives no details, but a few weeks ago he engineered refugee demonstrations in Tbilisi, which overthrew Tamaz Nadareishvili, the violently nationalist leader of the Abkhazian government in exile. I asked Alex Rondeli, the best-known political analyst in Georgia and another Saakashvili adviser, if there was a plan for some big gesture of reconciliation.

Rondeli is a large, witty man with a sardonic view of Russian scheming in the Caucasus. 'Plan? We Orthodox Christians don't make plans. Mikheil Saakashvili gets stuck in first and has a plan later.' Abkhazia, he said, was now a problem even for the Russians, who no longer entirely control it. 'This is a Pinocchio who has developed his own soul. But for Russian decision-makers, any solution must leave Abkhazia as a lever, an instrument of pressure on Georgia.'

He went on: 'We sometimes forget that the Abkhazians are afraid, just as we are afraid. They too see themselves as victims of greater powers. Some people there think that Georgia is backward and stagnant, and that a future with Russia is more promising. But others no longer believe that Georgia will exterminate them; they see how they have been manipulated by Russia, and there is a small group which has come to think that a new relationship with Georgia might maintain their identity whereas Russia would obliterate it. Unfortunately, there has been a stupid, irresponsible, chauvinistic elite in Georgia which has never grasped that the nation has genuine problems with minorities. If the Abkhazians are afraid of us, it is not without grounds.'

Could Saakashvili now make a dramatic gesture, admitting that Georgia had treated Abkhazia wrongly in the past and proposing a fresh start? 'We have to be extremely careful. Suppose he said sorry. It would be a disaster for him if there was no corresponding apology from the Abkhazians, who merely said: "So now you admit that we were right to choose independence . . . well, thank you and goodbye!" He would be humiliated in front of his own people.' Any such gesture would have to come after discreet preparation. 'We understand their fears, and guarantees could be negotiated for minorities, but there has to be a limit to Georgian concessions. They could have maximum autonomy, but within a single state. Not a confederation, but a strictly defined federation, underwritten by the international community. And we need that international community – not the Russians – to act as mediators for a settlement.' Rondeli ended: 'I say to the Abkhazians, please be Abkhazians, not Russians!'

But in Sukhum, I was surprised to find widespread suspicion about Saakashvili's intentions. Much has changed politically in the nine years since I was last there, and not all for the

better. Back then, there was a sparkle of idealism. Ministers who worked in half-ruined offices and were partly paid in food dreamed of building a tiny model democracy, tolerant and experimental. Now, after a decade of isolation, the government seems tired and inert. Every new initiative is at first assumed to be a trap.

On the other hand, a lively opposition has emerged. It challenges the melancholy conformism which intimidates debate, protests loudly against corruption and the neglect of poverty, and agitates for the removal of President Vladislav Ardzinba – the leader of the independence struggle, but now ill and ineffectual. Some of these critics say openly that the independence declaration of 1999 was a serious blunder, which merely added another padlock to Abkhazia's cell door. I found some of the old energetic spirit in Liana Kvarchelia, once an unofficial Abkhazian ambassador to the outside world and now running a Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in Sukhum. 'In spite of war, blockade and isolation,' she insisted, 'we really have developed something like a democracy and a parliament which is showing some independence.'

I talked to the foreign minister, Sergei Shamba, who will probably run for president at the elections in November. He started off with a routine recital of Georgia's vices – every official briefing to a foreigner includes Academician Sakharov's old remark that 'Georgia is a small empire' – and of Georgian attempts to destabilise Abkhazia by force. He was wary of the idea of exchanging apologies. 'I think the Georgian side is adopting different tactics, but to gain an advantage, not out of goodwill. We have nothing to apologise for. We have made our choice, which is independence, and there is no party or leader here supporting a return to Georgia or building a common political entity with Georgia.'

No open doors there. Shamba's line is that Georgia has to transform itself internally, overcoming corruption and achieving political and financial stability, before any new relationship can be built. Perhaps this is just playing for time. And yet something has to change. There is no real reason why Abkhazia cannot succeed as an independent Black Sea micro-state, with a population of 180,000 prospering thanks to beach tourism and agricultural exports. But it must rebuild a special and intimate relationship with Georgia if it is to avoid gradual absorption by Russia. Could Abkhazia and Georgia be associated as two states with some pooled sovereignty, on the European Union model? Shamba replied: 'In the long-term perspective, we could agree to that, but we have to concentrate on creating a state and community which will be respected by everyone.' And in Georgia there are voices saying much the same thing. Zurab Erkvania, a refugee leader who quarrelled with Nadareishvili and his dummy Abkhazian government in exile, says: 'We should start talking about restoring Georgian-Abkhazian relations, ending sanctions and opening transport links, rather than about Georgia's national integrity.' So far, Saakashvili has not dared to say anything like this – even if he wants to – in case it encourages secession in Ajara or South Ossetia. The day

is still far off when Russia and the United States agree to broker a settlement that recognises Abkhazia's independence, in some imaginative 'sovereignty-association' with Georgia. But that is the only route to a lasting solution for the Abkhazian problem, and the only path to security for Georgia.

The trouble is that a lot of people have found a comfortable niche in Abkhazia's twilight existence. The Russians are nicely fixed. Their military presence there makes them the arbiters of political change in Georgia and the southern Caucasus, while their soldiers eat better and have a more comfortable life than they would at home – let alone in Chechnya. The blockade also nourishes large 'families' of Russian and Abkhazian crooks and smugglers, dealing in petrol and timber. The Moscow mafia, after murdering local rivals, has established a monopoly over hazelnut production in the border province of Gali – a trade more profitable than it sounds. The Turkish fishing fleets, having stripped the rest of the Black Sea, are now hoovering up Abkhazia's coastal fish stocks, and it is not clear who has the right to stop them. And in Georgia the poverty of the 200,000 Abkhazian refugees allowed Nadareishvili and his pals to build up an exile state within the state, ensuring them political clout and easy money from funds meant for relief.

unomig are also part of the landscape. This is the UN Observer Mission in Georgia, whose basic job is to ensure compliance with the 1993 cease-fire and to see that the border zone stays disarmed. If either side tries to move a tank or a big gun into the zone, unomig are supposed to blow a whistle. If anyone shoots at them, which is very rare, their orders are to 'disengage' at once. They have no wish to shoot back, like Conor Cruise O'Brien in Katanga, or to end up like Griboyedov. Peace-keeping is the Russians' job, not theirs.

I stayed with them in their base at Sukhum, a shabby old Soviet hotel with peacocks in the garden. With not a great deal to do, and time to philosophise, they were great company. The core of unomig is a troupe of 23 colonels of every imaginable nationality. They miss their wives and are hungry for conversation. In the staff bar, I heard about Moravian architecture, 17th-century German lyric poetry and the Caithness recipe for potted heid.

And, like all peacetime soldiers, they ask themselves frequently what it's all for. Counting locally hired staff, unomig numbers only some four hundred men and women, but its annual budget is over \$30 million. That is roughly twice the budget of Abkhazia itself. Where the money goes is hard to discover. The bases are frugal – plastic tables, frayed carpets. It's true that maintaining military vehicles, a couple of helicopters and a small Antonov passenger plane is expensive, especially in fees for landing rights. On top of that, the mission spends a small amount – less than \$400,000 – on good works in the name of 'security': mending roads and bridges, or providing roofing material for schools. But this leaves the bulk of the bill unexplained. The officers in the field are uneasy. They find their remit too narrow. They feel

they should be mandated to do more political work to bring the two sides together, and to use their resources in a coherent programme to help the victims of the stand-off: the refugees, the old, the children. 'Some people wonder if all this is really cost-effective,' one of them said to me. 'Maybe it would be better just to hand the money over as direct aid.'

Some unomig staff do exactly that with their UN salaries. I met a big Norwegian security guard who is feeding and repairing an orphanage in the Abkhazian hills out of his own pocket. 'Before I got there, they were living on pails of Red Cross soup, which they had to reheat.' Single-handed, he organised a five-day football training camp for boys from Gali and from Zugdidi in Georgia, from the other side of the cease-fire line. A Sukhum paper sent a reporter to interview him. When the article appeared, it was fulsome about the camp idea and about this UN guard who was fanatical about the happiness of children. But the fact that some of the footballers came from Georgia was suppressed. In the newspaper, they were all from Abkhazia.

Georgia may be Orthodox, but its true religion is hospitality. A friend described driving through a Georgian village and seeing, in the rear mirror, men running out into the street and vainly waving bottles at the departing car. All that's best in Georgia is done on the spur of the moment, using the stranger as a pretext to give and to rejoice. Hours of drinking, feasting and toasting can follow, ending heaven knows when or where.

'Let's drop in on my son-in-law after the theatre, and have a quick cup of tea,' a friend suggested. At three in the morning I was still receiving and proposing toasts over the remains of a colossal meal, while two ladies, leaning on their elbows and smiling into one another's eyes, sang in harmony about love and loss.

Next day we visited a bookshop, and then the little car suddenly spun across the road and began to head for the countryside. But in less than an hour I was supposed to be interviewing somebody in town. 'Where are we going?' The three women in the car burst into delighted laughter. 'We are going from authoritarianism towards democracy!' When we finally stopped, it was at a transport café near Mtskheta, where I was taught how to eat khinkali dumplings without squirting the juice over my trousers.

Georgia is now the guest of history, which has merrily kidnapped her for a mystery journey. Almost anything could happen. The 'baby president' may get the nation whizzing down the road towards Europe with a free and plural political system, public services that work and a market economy that spreads prosperity widely. On the other hand, if it all goes wrong, he might turn out to be just one more erratic autocrat relying on nationalist rhetoric and the spoils system to stay in power.

In *Ali and Nino*, a character talks of Georgia being squeezed between 'the two claws of a red-

hot pair of tongs'. Then, he meant the claws of Russia and of Germany allied to Turkey. Today, the claws are Russia and the United States. Saakashvili, trained in America, like many of his young ministers, sees the new relationship with American power as entirely positive, a means of liberation. Others, fearing Russia and yet uneasy at the thought of becoming a Washington protectorate, wonder what the ultimate price of all these dollars will be.

The Americans are putting their diplomatic and financial muscle behind the new president. Their 2004 budget provides \$164 million to support the Georgian economy, while a new IMF mission, gritting its teeth over Georgia's frightful record of wasting credits, has arrived in Tbilisi. The State Department is pressing Russia to honour its 1999 commitment to evacuate its two remaining military bases in the country. A small American military contingent is already retraining the Georgian army, supposedly as part of the global 'war on terrorism'. In all this, the underlying aim is to create a pro-American 'zone of stability' in the southern Caucasus. Russian influence would be reduced and the Western investment in Caspian oil and gas would be secured, including the pipelines running across Azerbaijan and Georgia to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

But there are worrying precedents here. In Latin America, the United States has a habit of throwing its weight behind new, 'business-friendly' regimes before they have had time to establish their authority throughout their territory by peaceful means (Colombia, for instance). The result can be disproportionately strong governments whose power flows from American money and weaponry. In Georgia, constitutional changes are setting up a Western-style prime minister and cabinet, but they also grant the president control over the executive. The new parliamentary elections on 28 March seem likely to give Saakashvili's National Movement almost all the seats; Georgia, like South Africa under the ANC, will become a one-party democracy. The enthusiasm for 'Misha' is still enormous. But how will he react when the reforms he must make begin to hurt, and the votes begin to swing against him?

Two of his young ministers have already resigned, talking wildly about 'the establishment of an authoritarian regime'. But they have private grievances, and the omens are better than that. The finest thing that Saakashvili has said is that his revolution was the first 'velvet revolution' in the lands of the old Soviet Union. In other words, that it will not end in the sort of charade-liberation which left Belarus or Uzbekistan or even Ukraine with new autocrats ruling in the old way – baby Brezhnevs in folk costumes. What Saakashvili demands is a law-bound, honest, reasonably fair democracy: the vision which inspired Czechs, Poles and Lithuanians in 1989, even if it has tarnished since. He seems to mean it. And the Georgians, who have preserved their talent for joy through such bad times, deserve it.

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