The Rose Revolution: A Revolution without Revolutionaries?

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Abstract In this investigation of the sources of the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003 and presentation of the challenges the new leadership faces, the author argues that there are four contexts to the Georgian revolutionary events of 2003: first, a popular and romantic yearning among Georgians for union with Europe; second, the dismal failings of the Shevardnadze regime; third, the combined impact of global economic models and Westernisation in Georgia; and, fourth, the Soviet legacy. The role of civil society organisations, though important, was not vital to the success of the Rose Revolution. The manner in which the new leadership has tackled state-building challenges suggests the pro-Western revolution is still in a radical phase, with the imperative of state consolidation often overriding Western models of due process and democratic governance. The direction of the revolution – toward greater liberalism or radical populism – will have a major impact on regional politics and on the policies of both the US and the EU in the region.

Introduction

Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’ in November 2003 – resembling, in name at least, the ‘Carnation Revolution’ of Portugal in 1974 – seemed to vindicate Georgia’s long struggle for political normality. This small South Caucasian country after more than a decade of civil war, secessionist crises and growing political and economic corruption, has experienced a new democratic wave which ended the thirty-year dominance of Georgian politics by an aging Eduard Shevardnadze. The demonstrations and protests on the streets of Tbilisi following the fraudulent elections in November 2003 – demonstrations that surprisingly did not lead to violence – ended in Shevardnadze’s sudden and ignominious resignation. The 36-year-old Mikheil Saakashvili who led the insurrection against elite corruption and government indecision, after his election as president in January 2004, interpreted the Rose Revolution as a ‘new wave’ of democratic change with international significance. For Saakashvili, the Georgian revolution was the inspiration for similar liberation movements in the Middle East, in Central Asia and in Kyrgyzstan. Saakashvili frequently expostulates on Georgia’s ‘spiritual mission’, on its special role for humanity, and has described his country as ‘a beacon of freedom for the whole world’.

In a more elegant version of the adage that ‘a fish rots from the head’, Sir Lewis Namier suggests that such ecstatic post-revolutionary claims for
universal significance give too much credence to the ‘panaceas or nostrums’ of revolutionary leaders and their missions. The author writes, ‘Discontent with the government, there always is; still, even when grievous and well founded, it seldom engenders revolution till the moral bases of government have rotted away; the feeling of community between the masses and the rulers, and in the rulers a consciousness of their right and capacity to rule’ (cited in Kumar 1971, 168). Namier in this passage describes the root cause of Georgia’s Rose Revolution – a loss of faith at the top rather than revolution from below. Apart from a small coterie of activists, nobody was expecting the overthrow of the ancien régime and few wanted it. It was a revolution without revolutionaries.

Until the last few days, the demands were moderate and Shevardnadze, if he had had his usual political acumen, could have retreated and retained his power. Zurab Zhvania later commented that ‘even two days before President Shevardnadze’s resignation [on 23 November] he still had a chance to avoid the most dramatic scenario’ (Zhvania 2003). The street crowds and their leaders would have accepted something much less than his resignation – an admission of electoral fraud and a promise to hold honest elections would have sent them home with the ancien régime intact. Even when the crowd clamoured for Shevardnadze’s resignation, that could hardly be interpreted as a revolutionary demand. The triumvirate that led the revolution – Zurab Zhvania, Nino Burjanadze and Mikheil Saakashvili – was composed of moderates, even the brash Saakashvili. Instinctive anti-revolutionaries, they could barely be distinguished – ideologically at least – from Shevardnadze, although their political style and sincerity were on a higher scale. Zhvania, a sagacious political strategist who survived the alarms and frights of Georgian politics for over a decade to die in suspicious circumstances, as a result of a purported leaky gas heater, in an interview in January 2004 on the November 2003 events, declared,

People were not looking for a revolution … The new generation in Georgia has experienced what civil unrest means [in the civil war and war in Abkhazia in the early 1990s]. They have experienced how turbulent events can effect every family. (Karumidze and Wertsch 2005, 35)

If the goals of the Rose Revolution were not revolutionary – beyond a general demand for more reform, honesty in government, and a rejection of the old nomenklatura – neither was the outcome. In the two years since its joyous victory, the Rose Revolution has changed much about Georgian politics. With great speed – and the tempo is a revolutionary one – it has removed a substantial portion of the old political class, introduced constitutional amendments that significantly shifted the balance of power in favour of the executive, pursued market reforms with new vigour, increased bureaucratic accountability, diminished the presence of the former imperial power (Russia) in Georgia and strengthened the state by enhancing its capacity and discipline. Celebrating one year of power, Saakashvili proudly declared that ‘in 2004 Georgia started development as a State for the first time in the history of its independence’ (Saakashvili 2004). This is a boast that ignores Shevardnadze’s own contribution to state building in the 1990s, but it rightly points out the greater discipline and cohesion introduced into state structures after 2003.
The revolution’s critics see in this refashioning of the state a radical transformation and a distinct Brintonian stage of Bonapartism (Brinton 1938). The rule of law, they claim, despite the President’s legal training at Columbia and his former post as justice minister, has taken second place to the needs of the radical state, purging and renovating without due process. Too much power is concentrated in the hands of the executive, which is using such power in the name of radical reform and remains unconstrained by the largely pro-presidential one-party assembly or by the subdued press and diminished Third Sector – the nongovernmental. Although less corrupt than under Shevardnadze, the judiciary is now more vulnerable to executive influence due to increased presidential appointment powers and the President’s chairmanship of the Judicial Council, the top judicial administrative body (Civil.Ge 2004). Although more efficient and more dynamic, the structures of the state and the economic system in fact have changed very little – to the chagrin of many participants in the revolution who expected a more dramatic change in their lives. It is too early to talk of a cultural revolution reflected by a change in the mentality and behaviour of either civil servants or the population. The government’s attack on corruption has temporarily halted the more shameless practices of business and political elites but without a dramatic improvement in the economy (unlikely) or a long-term educational programme against corruption, traditional patterns of distrust between population and the state are unlikely to change. A public opinion survey by the International Republican Institute in June 2005 suggests popular trust of parliamentary and judicial structures has remained much the same as during the Shevardnadze era (Georgian National Voters’ Study 2005). Nothing much has changed economically for the 52% of the population which remains in poverty (IMF Country Report 2005, 2).

Other claims to revolution may be more authentic, such as the massive demonstrations overwhelming a weak police force and neutral army, the dramatic storming of the parliament, and the language of renewal aiming to reclaim constitutional rights stolen by the Shevardnadze regime. Such events are all reminiscent of revolutions. There was also hope that Georgia’s revolution would be a new global model of democratic change. The Borjomi declaration signed by Georgia and Ukraine in August 2005 called for a ‘Community of Democratic Choice’ that will free ‘our region from all remaining dividing lines, from violations of human rights … frozen conflicts and thus … open a new era of democracy, security, stability and lasting peace for the whole of Europe, from the Atlantic to the Caspian Sea,’ which reflects this revolutionary chiliasm (Civil.Ge 2005b). The Rose Revolution, like all revolutions, had claims beyond its borders. It created a new sense of vulnerability among neighbouring regimes and, more importantly, a great sense of possibility among their youthful oppositions. It revealed, as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have illustrated in their pioneering book on the subject, that there are active international advocacy networks of youthful oppositionists and clever strategists who are just waiting to pounce on the

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1 Crane Brinton was an American historian. In his classic work *Anatomy of a Revolution* (1938), he argues that the rise of a strong man is one of the inevitable stages of revolution.

2 The national survey suggests 39% looked favorably on the courts, 39% unfavorably and 23% did not know. The figures for the political parties were 37%, 47% and 15%, and for local authorities 37%, 46% and 18%. However, the president’s office got a 68% approval and the police an astonishing 70% (Georgian National Voters’ Study 2005).
missteps of semi-authoritarian regimes around the world (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Like the activists of 1848, 1917 and 1968, and sustained in part by crusading businessmen like George Soros, these 21st-century activists are ready to push crumbling regimes into the ‘dustbin of history’.

Undoubtedly, what happens in Georgia will influence state- and nation-building strategies in other countries in the South Caucasus and in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Like the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which affected the entire Iberian peninsula (and Portugal’s colonies in Africa), Georgia’s political trajectory will have an impact on the policies of its regional neighbours, though complementary revolutions – despite some opposition attempts – have not occurred in Azerbaijan and Armenia so far. What happens in Georgia will determine the commitment of Western supporters in the region such as the US and the EU, and will affect Russian relations with both. This is clear already with Georgia’s intensified campaign to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. However, the success of Georgia’s new democratic experiment under Saakashvili is not guaranteed – the West has got it wrong twice before when it enthusiastically greeted both former presidents Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze as pro-Western democratisers who would, as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1978) put it, ‘routinise’ and ‘internalise’ democratic practice ‘in social, institutional and … psychological life’ (cited in Diamond and Plattner 2001, xiii).

The Rose Revolution is both modern and subversive for regional authoritarians, but it may have already encountered its limitations both internally and externally. Many in the West, including President George W Bush, greeted the Rose Revolution as an exportable model for popular democratic movements elsewhere in the world, and saw it as a vindication of America’s prolonged policies of aid to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society. Saakashvili embodied the longed-for middle-class grassroots democratic movement from below, a trend sometimes referred to as ‘civil society in revolt’. Saakashvili temporarily restored the popular Western model of an unstoppable dynamic of democratic transition that, through democratisation aid, civil society and elections, will eventually consolidate its hold. This modernising theology had begun to lose its promise of progress and victory in the face of the withering criticism of scholars like Thomas Carothers (2004) and Stephen Holmes (1997).

But what sort of victory is the Rose Revolution? Is it a model that sounds the tocsin beyond Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan – in Kazakhstan and Belarus, for example – or does it represent a parting of ways between vulnerable weak quasi-democracies on the one hand and tough autocracies on the other? Is it civil society development or is it political culture that will provide the best clues to the success or failure of political change? Is the Rose Revolution a sign of further victories to come or the result of a very particular conjunction of local politics, national-cultural ideas and forces? And has the Rose Revolution over the last two years transformed itself into a ‘Rosy Revolution’, based on public relations rather than genuine democratic change?

**The Rose Revolution’s Past**

The Rose Revolution in Georgia embodies a long and idealistic tradition among Georgian radicals since the mid-1800s to replace legacies of colonialism,
authoritarianism and political peripheralism with self-determination, self
government and Europeanism. Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907) and the
tergdaleulni\(^3\) were the first conscious nation builders in 19th-century Georgia,
imitators of Giuseppe Garibaldi, Lajos Kossuth and Frantisek Palacky. Educated
in St Petersburg, Moscow or in the European universities of Geneva and Paris,
they launched a generational attack on the archaic views and political passivity of
their ‘fathers’. Calling for an end to what Chavchavadze called ‘the muddy and
algae infested lake’ of Georgian political life, they introduced European ideas
through newspapers, election campaigns, business associations and charitable
organisations (Chavchavadze 1977, 2, 373). This anti-colonial movement for
cultural and political union with Europe was reinforced in 1918–21 when
Georgian leaders established an independent Georgian social democratic republic
that distanced itself from Bolshevism with a moderate and mixed socialist
economic system. Current Georgian leaders who came to power in November
2003 cling to a globally orthodox liberalism, but they share many of the aspirations
of their pro-European predecessors. Large numbers of the new cabinet team, like
Saakashvili himself, were educated in the US. Their stated goal, like that of their
antecedents, is to establish a democratic, economically productive, and
‘European’ national state. In that sense, they are completing a Georgian nation-
building project begun over 150 years ago by a radical group of intelligentsia
activists seeking an end to the humiliation of colonial dependence.

It is inadequate, of course, to seek explanations of the Rose Revolution in such
continuities. 2003 presented quite different challenges to those of the 19th century.
The accelerated global exchange of goods, information and values, the impact of
powerful international organisations and the international media, and the sudden
poverty facing Georgians following the collapse of the Soviet welfare state – are
all vital sources of the November 2003 events. However, the ideas of the
tergdaleulni and their social democratic successors, with their emphasis on
Georgia’s European heritage, modernisation, entrepreneurship, anti-colonialism
and the rule of law, provided the emotional underpinnings of debates leading up
to 2003. Central to polemics of the late 19th century were themes of democracy,
self-government, economic growth, relations with Europe and Russia, national
education and the creation of national consciousness. Mikheil Saakashvili’s
speeches consciously echo these themes: greater community between ruler and
ruled, the creation of a modern economy, the introduction of European
institutions, and national unity based on a newly ‘cultured’ public. Like the
tergdaleulni, he talks of a new ‘energetic and patriotic generation’ which will
restore broken bridges (a common metaphor of the tergdaleulni) and help Georgia
regain its place in Europe. Every revolution is national, and Georgia’s was as
much about national-cultural renewal as a protest against post-Communist
economic blues and corruption. Along with global forces transforming Georgian
political life, we should not neglect the intellectually indigenous roots of
Georgians’ long-standing European aspirations.

\(^3\)The tergdaleulni were young Georgian radicals of the 1860s–1880s, who advocated
realism in literature, educational reform, cultural freedom and self-government for
Georgians within the empire. They got their name (literally, ‘those who had drunk from the
Terek’) from the river Terek, the ostensible border between Russian and Georgia, which
they crossed to receive higher education in Russian universities.
The Post-Soviet Legacy

One of the most disturbing bequests of the Soviet era in Georgia was a social and political chasm between elites and their subjects and a wide division between urban and rural cultures. Both these divisions hampered the attempts of the Shevardnadze regime to build an effective state and a sense of cohesive nationhood. In the last decade, neither non-governmental organisations nor parliament nor new parliamentary parties nor newly elected mayors were able to bridge these gaps. This dislocation was due in part to popular disillusion generated by the socio-economic crisis, but it also reflected the habits of Georgian political elites, the vast majority of whom were former Soviet officials who remained in leading positions under Shevardnadze. Neither the Gamsakhurdia nor the Shevardnadze presidency led to any significant circulation of elites. Although in many cases these elites were pragmatic and only lightly touched by communist beliefs, they breathed in a Soviet bureaucratic culture that esteemed hierarchy and secrecy and fostered corruption. The state they ran was not impartial, law-abiding, popularly supported, or accountable to the populace. Unfortunately for Georgia’s transition to a more transparent system, the Soviet interconnection of private and state interests remained the norm, making the voluntary discharge of power akin to the loss of economic well-being. Georgia’s political parties, potentially important communicators of new democratic values, could in principle have provided an alternative vision to unredeemed ex-Soviet officials. But in Georgia they discredited themselves with arcane internal debates, personal squabbles and intrigue, and were unable to develop the organisational capacity of genuinely popular parties capable of promoting popular cooperation with the state. The parties themselves were hampered by the amorphousness of Georgian society, a result of a Soviet system that prevented the coalition of social and economic interests from below. The middle class, often marked by political scientists as the source of democracy and the rule of law, remained a distant prospect in Georgia (Moore 1987).

Georgia’s Rose Revolution was driven in part by an attempt to end the Soviet legacy of distrust between state and society and to complete the unfinished revolution of 1991. The Rose Revolution was led by the first post-Soviet generation – the likes of Prime Minister Zhvania – who started their political careers in the Gorbachev era, untrammelled by the traditional Soviet habits of governance and corruption. They were un-Soviet and their avowed purpose was to introduce new codes of political behaviour, restore popular faith in the state and end the obscure and uncontrolled elite politics of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The anti-corruption campaign – the most public and appealing part of the opposition’s programme – was the best mechanism for promoting these goals. An end to corruption implied a new morality centred on government institutions that would respond to citizen demands and transparency. These goals, it was hoped, would end the historic chasm, deepened by Soviet rule, that existed between state and society.

Paralysis at the Top

Looking at the events of November 2003 when the streets of Tbilisi were clogged with a sea of excited faces and flags, any seasoned observer of Georgian politics
would have had an inexorable feeling of déjà vu. In the last 14 years, Georgia has experienced wrenching transformations – in 1990–1 under Gamsakhurdia and for most of the remaining decade under his successor, Shevardnadze. Both men came to power as pro-Western heroes, saviours brandishing promises of renewal and democracy, in Gamsakhurdia’s case generating popular support that bordered on a cult of mass adulation. Despite protestations of loyalty to democracy, both men squandered their popularity, failed to establish effective statehood, neglected to implement the rule of law, alienated political allies, divided the nation, lost legitimacy and ended up unceremoniously and dishonourably discharged from the presidency. But important differences persisted. For example, Shevardnadze departed without violence – what current President Saakashvili described as ‘a courageous act’ – and maintained Georgians’ newly found political pluralism in the press and in parliament. But both men were unable to break a Soviet Georgian pattern of personal rule, political corruption, and authoritarianism embedded in an essentially unbroken post-Soviet tradition of cadre politics. Under the two men, Georgia endured more than a decade of chaos, poverty and fragmentation. The democratic state that both publicly promoted eventually withered into what some authors call a ‘low intensity democracy’ characterised by periodic (flawed) elections and a lack of government accountability or effectively protected civil rights (Gills et al 1993).

The Rose Revolution in Georgia revealed a regime that had depleted its social and political support both at home and abroad. In Shevardnadze’s final months, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suspended aid to Georgia because of non-fulfilment of fiscal requirements and the largest foreign investor in Georgia, the American company AES (American Electric Services), sold its assets to the Russian company United Energy Systems and left the country. Dominated by mutually dependent business and bureaucratic interests, Georgia’s ruling political class failed to implement the elementary mechanisms of statehood symbolised by the extraordinarily incompetent electoral preparation for the November 2003 parliamentary elections which left both the main opposition leader and Shevardnadze’s wife off the electoral rolls. Sir Lewis Namier, describing the revolutions of 1848, could have been talking of Georgia when he wrote of the ‘corrosion of the moral and mental bases of government’ which led to ‘paralysis of will and a consciousness of defeat before the fight was joined’ (Namier 1962, 169–70). The Georgian political elite was divided in 2002–3 when the ruling government party – the Citizens’ Union of Georgia – was abandoned by Shevardnadze and broke into a myriad political shards. Fractured and isolated, the rump government party reincarnated as a coalition known as New Georgia, but it represented an establishment closely associated with corruption and political failure. It had no roots in Georgian society and no distinguishable programme that anyone bothered to read. Polls on the eve of the November elections showed derision for the institutions of government and the personalities who ran it. Support for Shevardnadze in his last months was non-existent.

Georgia was in what Thomas Carothers termed a ‘grey zone’ characterised by poor representation of citizens’ interests, low levels of political participation beyond voting, frequent abuse of the law by government officials, elections of uncertain legitimacy, very low levels of public confidence in state institutions, and persistently poor institutional performance by the state. (Carothers 2004, 172)
Despite a semblance of stability and continuity symbolised by the aging figure of Shevardnadze, the Georgian political system was corroding from within. Much of this was due to Shevardnadze’s own complacency, characterised by his half-hearted campaign against corruption, the continuing compromises and humiliations over the lost territories of secessionist Abkhazia and South Osetia, and his emphasis on personal rule and the office of the presidency. Through the formal powers of the presidential office such as decrees and appointments, and through the informal powers of patronage, Shevardnadze contributed to the emasculation of Georgia’s political parties and the supineness of the legislature. He abandoned the majority of the population outside Tbilisi to the cynical manipulations of corrupt regional governors. After the presidential elections of April 2000, which Shevardnadze won with 79.8% of the vote – an election that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) diplomatically declared ‘not in full accordance with the law’ – his power became increasingly limited to instructions, public scoldings, appointments and press statements (ODIHR 2000). Shevardnadze’s signature on a presidential decree could be safely ignored, as could his grave expressions of dissatisfaction. Mechanisms to monitor the implementation of laws and executive decisions – the management of the state – failed. Shevardnadze’s isolation from public opinion and concerns became increasingly evident. Like President Boris Yeltsin, Shevardnadze began to regard himself as a patriarch, distant, wise, a mediator of conflicts among contending opponents. He referred to Georgian youth as his ‘children’, most of whom were profoundly alienated from their ‘father’ and the political structures he established. Retreating into a world of self-delusion, bolstered by an increasingly conservative court circle of politicians and relatives, he made a string of miscalculations which led to his unexpected retirement in November 2003.

The Role of Civil Society

When the end came it was sudden and a surprise even to the opposition. The root cause was the decay of the old regime and its loss of legitimacy. The police and army stood aside, unlike their regime-loyal equivalents in Azerbaijan in the October 2003 presidential elections and in the Armenian presidential elections in March 2003. Theories emanating from Russia and from Shevardnadze’s former allies suggest the whole revolutionary process was an American conspiracy involving governments and civil society sponsors like George Soros. The revolutionaries’ plan, detractors in Russia allege, was to eliminate the Russian Federation from the region. While crudely conspiratorial, these assessments are not a complete fantasy.

First, plans were made: a small group of young activists gathered around Mikheil Saakashvili’s political party – the National Movement – and a number of prominent NGOs such as the Liberty Institute were trained in the methods and tactics of non-violent political opposition to authoritarian leaders. The Serbian opposition’s success against President Milosevic in 2000 after he annulled the election – in particular the role of the Serbian student organisation Otpor (Resistance) and its tactics of mass street demonstrations, fraternisation with the police and non-violence – were adopted in Georgia. Leaders of the Liberty Institute openly admit they received training from Serbian NGOs like the Centre for Applied Non-Violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) and the Centre for Non-Violent Resistance. There was no criminal intent in Georgia – eliminating
most legal bases for charges of conspiracy – and the challenge to the government was popularly supported and quickly legitimised domestically and internationally by presidential and parliamentary elections within four months. But the purpose of the revolution’s leaders was the premature removal of a legally elected president. They organised and directed mass protests and strategised over each step that led to the showpiece – the storming of the parliament building. Leon Trotsky, the greatest revolutionary strategist, points out that every insurrection ‘needs a suitable organisation, it needs a plan: it needs a conspiracy’ (Trotsky 1932–3). But in the end, the victorious result was as unexpected to the Georgian oppositionists as it was to the crowds outside the parliament building.

Second, despite US and European misunderstandings of Georgian social needs and IMF policies that undermined the capacity of the Georgian state – an IMF inspired tax code, for example, drove most Georgian business underground and deprived the state of needed revenue – the last decade in Georgia could be described as soft Western intervention. A continuation of the Reagan ‘crusade for democracy’, both US and European governance programmes over the last decade in Georgia subverted post-Soviet Russian patterns of control and administration. Russia, undermined by the bankruptcy of Communism and the fall of the USSR, had neither the moral authority nor the financial means to challenge the Western invasion of ‘democracy-makers’ – in fact its own citizen activists were largely pro-Western too. However, a vital advantage of Western NGOs and government agencies, which gave them the potential to influence parliamentarians, civil servants and the Third Sector in Georgia, was not so much their ethical arguments (though those contrasted strongly with the moral decay at the top) as their deep pockets. For the first decade of Georgian independence, before native businesses had established themselves as respectable employers in Georgia, the best way for educated youth to save themselves and their families from poverty was either emigration or the Third Sector. Without Western sustenance, the Third Sector could barely have survived in Georgia.

Between 1995 and 2000, the US government spent over US$700 million on direct aid to Georgia. In 2000, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) spent US$200 per person in Georgia compared with US$1.25 in Russia. The US blanketed Georgia with civic and democracy-building programmes through USAID, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the World Bank, the Eurasia Foundation and a myriad of other smaller programmes such as the Center for Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector (IRIS) at the University of Maryland, and American University’s Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC). The EU was not far behind though less visible. Between 1992 and 2004, for example, it contributed €420 million and this did not include contributions from separate member states either directly or indirectly through NGOs. In June 2004, a Brussels donor conference secured pledges worth €850 million. But the waste has been colossal; the programmes often served a foundation’s agenda or a government directive rather than Georgian needs. Western employees were ignorant of Georgian cultural nuances and often arrogant toward better-informed local civic activists. Carothers has elegantly enumerated the limitations of Western aid approaches to the former Soviet Union, especially its failures in institution-building and economic reform (2004). But these programme achieved important goals despite their focus on a peculiarly rarefied Western conception of civil society which rarely included trade
unions or professional associations, and which accentuated the chasm between
the young educated haves and the mass of poorly connected and less-educated
have-nots, and paradoxically weakened the links between professionalised NGOs
and their impoverished clients in Georgian society.

Western funding was crucial to the support of a young and educated layer of
Georgian social and political activists – a modern ‘labour aristocracy’ – which
through public debate and the media promoted Western legal standards and rules
of political accountability. This is not to suggest Georgian civil society had no
indigenous roots. Non-governmental organisations and political clubs emerged in
Georgia long before the collapse of the USSR and the influx of US democracy
dollars, but without US and European aid – despite the extraordinarily able
‘mental software’, as Claus Offe calls it, of local intelligentsias, professionals and
civil society activists – it is doubtful Georgian civil society had the organisational
capacity to effectively challenge and monitor the government. Georgia was the
fourth-largest per capita recipient of USAID aid in 2002–3, much of the aid going
to democracy and governance, including election reform, local government, rule
of law (judicial reform) and the development of the Third Sector (NGOs). Many of
the programmes, despite tremendous weaknesses in administration, monitoring,
and goals, promoted citizen mobilisation and advocacy networks among NGOs.
Overall, this had a significant cumulative impact.

Particularly active in the extra-parliamentary opposition were the approxi-
mately 5,000 foot soldiers of the kmara (Enough) organisation, a loosely organised
group of students who had attended three-day summer camps in Georgia run by
former Otpor activists and whose actions of civil disobedience, including the
blocking of public thoroughfares and irreverent anti-Shevardnadze slogans
painted on public buildings, underlined the helplessness of the regime. The
writing was literally on the wall. Innumerable Georgian NGOs, loosely
coordinated by Western-funded organisations such as the International Society
for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and the Georgian Young Lawyers’
Association (GYLA), publicised the electoral fraud and successfully petitioned
the Georgian Supreme Court for an annulment of the fraudulent electoral results.
The public accusations of NGO observers were given popular and international
credibility due to their organisation of parallel voting tabulation and exit polls in
a representative number of precincts. Whether these were accurate or not did not
matter. Popular perception was that they were because they differed from the
government tallies. Non-governmental organisation links with sympathetic
newspapers and TV stations – like the independent TV station Rustavi 2, which
played a vital role in the anti-Shevardnadze movement – helped carry the news
and the case for Shevardnadze’s removal to the provinces.

In all, four factors made NGOs particularly effective in the revolution’s
leadership: their experience of coordination and cooperation, much of it gained
through the agency of international organisations like the UN and USAID;
common understanding of reform needs and organisational needs; a facility with
technology including the powerful communication weapons of the cell phone and
email; and, finally, their youth, which generated enthusiasm and made them
willing to take risks.

But NGOs in Georgia, despite their influence, were not the prime movers of the
Rose Revolution; they were its facilitators. Regime change in Georgia was brought
about by repeated political and budgetary crises; it would not have succeeded
without the dissatisfied multitudes willing to brave the authorities and the weather or the foolish stubbornness of the old leaders. Underlying the popular mobilisation that spilled into Rustaveli Avenue in the chilly days of November was the continued economic decline and moral degeneracy of the leadership. But, finally, there was the undeniably courageous and strategically smart leadership of Saakashvili. The catalyst was the appearance for the first time of a viable and effective opposition to Shevardnadze led by a charismatic populist opposition leader. The National Movement, which along with its NGO allies, led the revolutionary assault on the old regime, was established in 2001. Under the leadership of Saakashvili – who as Tbilisi’s city council chairman prior to the November election used his municipal platform to prove his party’s solidarity with the urban poor – the National Movement, unlike its tired and tainted rivals, acquired the structural attributes of a modern party. The emphasis on predominantly extra-parliamentary activity – parliament was thoroughly discredited – and its organisational capacity and support in the regions were important in the end. It was the dramatic mobilisation of regional supporters – in particular from Zugdidi, the former base of support of Gamsakhurdia, who snaked into Tbilisi in a long convoy of buses and vehicles in late November in the full glare of TV cameras – that probably convinced many of the defenders of the regime that the game was up. Most of the soldiers, ordered to defend the government, were from the neglected provinces too.

Along with the National Movement’s organisational capacity was the public persona of Saakashvili. Articulate and young, unlike his rivals who were still attached to Soviet-style rallies or TV talk shows, he used the full arsenal of Western politicians – walkabouts, glad-handing, baby-coddling – along with a finely tuned rhetoric for the Georgian ear. Emotional, angry, confrontational, patriotic, tough, Saakashvili understood what Georgian voters wanted – a virile, excitable and uncompromising hero with the promise of economic and political salvation. Saakashvili rebutted critics of his wild language and style – ‘you can’t mobilize people without these kinds of speeches’, he declared; ‘[t]hat’s the style that mobilizes people’ (Baker 2003). He sealed his popularity by bravely leading the charge over the barricades to prevent the newly convoked legislature from legalising itself. There is little doubt that without Saakashvili the opposition would not have won. Those in the opposition who opposed direct action – the Labour Party, the Traditionalists and Industry Will Save Georgia – lost all credibility and a new political landscape dominated by the National Movement emerged overnight.

New Challenges

The new government of President Saakashvili, in power for almost two years, faces a daunting raft of problems intrinsic to Georgia’s peripheral status, its size, geographic position, colonial history, multiethnic population and weak tradition of national and state cohesion. The reaffirmation of Georgian statehood is the primary issue for Saakashvili in two ways: first is the need to increase the state’s capacity and authority, and second to integrate its multiethnic population and regain its territorial integrity. The death of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania in February 2005 will complicate Saakashvili’s task. Zhvania was a powerful
influence who restrained radical proposals among Saakashvili’s cabinet members for reintegrating ‘lost’ Georgian territories by force.

State Capacity

Georgia’s most serious challenge is not the multitude of tasks it faces but the establishment of state capacity to deal with them. Georgian statehood has a long history, but it is one dominated by a weak centre, a backward economy, regional divisions, dependence on larger powers and political division. Subjects in a police state, Georgians have learned that reliance on private networks rather than legal mechanisms was the best way to protect their interests. They believe in a moral law determined by tradition and the family. State laws have been avoided not only because they were bad but because the population could manage better without them. This experience has left most Georgians unfamiliar with institution-building and sceptical of the state’s legal structures. The new government’s task is to reverse this ingrained habit and, perhaps for the first time in Georgia’s modern history, establish the congruity of private and public well-being. The government has begun this process through a number of measures: a massive and rather theatrical crackdown on corrupt figures including a helicopter snatch in Achara and the arrest of the former president’s son-in-law, a series of anti-corruption laws designed to demonstrate the integrity of the state and legalise the second economy, national parliamentary elections in March 2004, institutional reform to clarify the division of powers between the legislature, government and executive and to toughen vertical lines of authority, a massive reduction of swollen state personnel rolls, in particular the police, deeper privatisation designed to extract the state even further from the economy and a package of social and educational reforms, including a doubling of pensions.

These measures were popular, but contained contradictions that have soured government relations with the Georgian Third Sector, the press and regional organisations such as the Council of Europe. The government’s retrieval of money from corrupt officials was opaque; little information was published about how the sums violators owed were calculated. Punished officials were released without trial after payment or in some cases detained and subsequently tortured. Due process was not observed. Constitutional reform, rushed through parliament with minimal discussion in February 2004, was designed to make government more accountable to parliament. Yet, the nominal transition to a semi-presidential system gave the President new and unprecedented powers to dismiss the legislature and appoint and dismiss judges. Parliamentary elections in March gave Saakashvili’s National Movement–Democratic bloc an unassailable 66.2% of the vote and 135 of the 150 contested seats. The high 7% barrier meant only one other coalition, the Rightist Opposition–Industrialist–Novas bloc, gained representation in parliament. With support from two other parliamentary factions – the Majoritarians and New Majoritarians (representatives from the legislature’s additional 75 single mandate seats) – Saakashvili is almost guaranteed the two-thirds necessary to change the constitution, should he wish to do so. Parliament has become a presidential body.

Such contradictions reveal two dilemmas. First there are tensions inherent in state- and democracy-building in an impoverished and post-Communist country
like Georgia. The transition in Georgia – in part due to Western economic policies – weakened the state and the latter, failing to redefine its role, created a vast institutional vacuum. Gordon Smith talks of five features of state-building for transitional systems – decision-making, integration, extraction, adjudication and coercion (Smith 1999, 3–17). Saakashvili has improved performance in all five, but the Georgia state is still poor, fragmented and absent in a number of its territories. Saakashvili’s government, facing a financially and politically incapacitated system, has to redefine and reassemble central state authority. In doing so, it risks eliminating important constraints on state power such as the parliament, locally elected officials, and independent courts. Nino Burjanadze, the parliamentary Speaker, has already complained of the weakening of parliament’s oversight role. Parliament passed almost unanimously 90 laws in the first parliamentary session in 2004, suggesting only cursory debate of the bills (Civil.Ge 2004a). The President has not only gained greater legal powers than Shevardnadze – the latest being the creation of a paramilitary Special Foreign Intelligence Service that is personally supervised by and responsible to the President – but has immensely greater authority. The second dilemma – or temptation – is that, as ‘revolutionary leader’ and state builder, Saakashvili will use his authority to avoid the ‘drag’ of consensus building and negotiation. The radical manner in which Saakashvili came to power, the institution of the presidency, the oppositional vacuum and the Georgian political tradition of personal power all accentuate this tendency. One of Saakashvili’s heroes is Atatürk, a state builder, but hardly a democrat.

Integration

Integral to the issue of the state’s institutional capacity is the particularly severe problem in Georgia regarding national integration. As with state-building and democracy, there are ineradicable tensions between state-building and multinational integration. Even in stable liberal societies, the majority culture is likely to be dominant and discriminatory. In developing multiethnic states, beset by desperate resource competition and conflicting national identities, the situation is far more difficult and cohesion is often sought in establishing the majority culture as the state culture. The national language as state language, for example, serves both goals of state- and nation-building. State-building has rarely been a multiethnic project; multiethnic tolerance comes later under conditions of stability and consolidated democracy.

When Shevardnadze came to power, strong regionalist movements and civil war underlined disagreements on what constituted ‘Georgianness’, and disputes over national symbols and history, territorial structures and majority–minority relations showed nation- and state-building in Georgia to be incomplete. Georgians were fighting among themselves over the ‘national project’ as much as they were with non-Georgians. In this context, Shevardnadze attempted to transform nationalism into a focus for unity based on reconciliation, a strong and independent state, a restored self-image of multinational tolerance, and citizenship. By the mid 1990s, this ‘defanged’ nationalism was accompanied, as Rogers Brubaker puts it, by ‘declining curves of mobilisation’ in Georgia (Brubaker 1998, 272–306). Yet, Shevardnadze’s attempt at multinational state-building was a failure. The state had no monopoly of violence in vast areas of the
country which were de facto independent or ruled by clannish networks and local ethnocracies. Abkhazia and South Osetia successfully seceded under Russian protection, Achara under its local potentate, Aslan Abashidze, remained outside the state’s institutional structures and ignored central laws, and, to the south, the Armenian region of Javakheti was more closely integrated into neighbouring Armenia than into Georgia.

Sakashvili’s patriotic populism has both improved and exacerbated this situation. On the one hand, democratic elections and the flight of Aslan Abashidze to Moscow in May 2004 led to the peaceful reintegration of Achara. Yet an attempt in August 2003 to impose Georgian authority in South Osetia failed miserably, leading to more bloodshed and fiercer resistance. Endless negotiations continue over the status of Abkhazia. The new government has put forward constructive proposals for South Osetia. It will grant the regional legislature independent decision-making powers in local government, on social issues and in secondary education. It is prepared to let the South Ossetians control economic issues, including a free trade zone in their own autonomous republic. Georgia will retain control over defence, the borders and currency. By contrast, after elections in Achara in June which swept the Sakashvili–Victorious Achara bloc to power with 28 out of 30 seats in the Acharian Supreme Council (the Republican Party gained two seats as the only opposition and accused the Sakashvili–Victorious Achara bloc of ballot rigging), a statute of autonomy was introduced that gave the Georgian president the power to dissolve the Acharian Supreme Council as well as the Acharian cabinet if the Supreme Council repeatedly refused to accept his candidate for Acharian prime minister. The statute, according to a report by the Council of Europe, gives Achara ‘nominal autonomy with little if any practical consequence’ (Council of Europe 2004).

Conclusion

Georgia today is a more efficient and less corrupt state. The progress was acknowledged by the EU, which reversed its earlier decision and accepted Georgia – along with Azerbaijan and Armenia – into its Wider Europe Neighbourhood Initiative. The government’s anti-corruption campaign not only raised the moral level of government but improved the state’s extraction capacity. In 2004, for example, annual tax revenues increased 48% and customs revenue multiplied five times. Economic reform including the introduction of a flat tax rate has contributed to a healthy growth in gross domestic product (GDP) of 8.5% (Civil.Ge 2004c). Salaries of government officials were raised – courtesy of Soros and the EU – and pensions were doubled to 28 lari (still an unlivable US$13 per month). Freedom of speech was reinforced with a law strengthening journalists’ rights against accusations of libel and a new Public Defender (ombudsman) was appointed from within the NGO community. Yet along with these advances, Georgia has its most powerful president since independence, no effective parliamentary opposition, a Third Sector weakened by the leakage of its members into government, a judicial system that is subject to presidential interference and control, an unreformed local government system, intimidated media and a centralised state model that has significantly diminished Achara’s autonomy. Fortunately, dissent has emerged within the National Movement, including
resignations and aisle-crossing. Third Sector activists have engaged the government with open letters of complaint about continued abuses of civil and human rights, and warnings against a creeping language of intolerance in parliament. Georgia is still on the path to effective statehood and solvency. Western aid programmes have undoubtedly contributed to this ‘second chance’. But whether Georgia will fulfil the mission set by the tergadeulni over a century ago and rejoin Europe as a fully fledged democratic partner remains an open question. At this stage, the question of building the state has already become entangled with the question of limiting the state. The culture of modernisation and renewal is ever taking the culture of participation and openness, and the arrogance of power has begun to alienate its youthful supporters.

References


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