



# Georgia's Return of the King

Working Paper Series No. 22

Georgi Derluguian

**PROGRAM ON  
NEW APPROACHES  
TO RUSSIAN SECURITY**

Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Washington, D.C.

## About CSIS

For four decades, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has been dedicated to providing world leaders with strategic insights on—and policy solutions to—current and emerging global issues.

CSIS is led by John J. Hamre, formerly deputy secretary of defense, who became president and CEO in April 2000. It is guided by a board of trustees chaired by former senator Sam Nunn and consisting of prominent individuals from both the public and private sectors.

The CSIS staff of 190 researchers and support staff focus primarily on three subject areas. First, CSIS addresses the full spectrum of new challenges to national and international security. Second, it maintains resident experts on all of the world's major geographical regions. Third, it is committed to helping to develop new methods of governance for the global age; to this end, CSIS has programs on technology and public policy, international trade and finance, and energy.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., CSIS is private, bipartisan, and tax-exempt. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

## About PONARS

The Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (PONARS) is a network of 55 post-Soviet scholars from the United States, Russia, and Ukraine who analyze Russian security issues. These leading social scientists focus on myriad aspects of Russian security, including state building, civil society, links with international institutions, in addition to traditional security (military and foreign policy) concerns. Program participants examine the effects of these factors on Russia's national security interests and policies, as well as U.S.-Russia relations. PONARS's activities include academic and policy-oriented conferences, two publications series, and daily interaction over an e-mail network.

PONARS is funded by the International Peace and Security Program of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Program on Global Security and Sustainability of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The views expressed herein are those of the authors alone; publication in this series does not imply endorsement by PONARS, Carnegie Corporation, MacArthur Foundation, or CSIS.

© 2004 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

All rights reserved.

### PONARS

Center for Strategic and International Studies  
1800 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006  
Tel: (202) 775-7322  
Fax: (202) 775-3199  
E-mail: [ponarsinfo@csis.org](mailto:ponarsinfo@csis.org)

Web site: <http://www.csis.org/ruseura/ponars>

For more information on PONARS or for copies of policy memos or working papers, please contact us at [ponarsinfo@csis.org](mailto:ponarsinfo@csis.org).

Celeste A. Wallander, Executive Director  
Stephen Hanson, Academic Director  
Jacqueline Miller, Assistant Director and  
Series Editor

# Georgia's Return of the King

*Georgi Derluguian*  
*Northwestern University*  
*February 2004*

The November 2003 revolution in Georgia did not unseat a Communist stalwart but Eduard Shevardnadze, the man who has been lionized in the West for helping to end the Cold War. This fact seemed suspicious to many foreign commentators, especially those of a leftist bent as well as the analysts in Moscow who followed the new nationalist fashion of suspecting U.S. meddling throughout Russia. An example cited to back up claims of U.S. interference: the U.S. ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, had been stationed in Serbia during the fall of Slobodan Milosevic. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's lightning visit to Georgia shortly after the abdication of Shevardnadze mightily added to the suspicions. Other nefarious foreign interests have been cited as well: the multinational oil corporations, Moscow, the Chechen smuggler warlords, and even those crafty Armenians (Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's new president, was himself maliciously accused of "really" being a *Saakian*, that is, an ethnic Armenian).

However, if there was in fact foreign involvement in the ousting of Shevardnadze, it was the generous funding provided to the Georgian liberal opposition by the eccentric billionaire George Soros. From what can be discerned, Soros's grants served to promote two conditions of a successful revolution: organizational learning and propaganda. Georgian student activists spent the last summer learning from their Serbian counterparts about successful techniques of paralyzing and overthrowing weak authoritarian regimes, and the private Georgian television channel Rustavi-2, financed by various Western sources, broadcasted the documentary film about the fall of Milosevic during the weeks of protests in Georgia. Yet, Soros's purported role, if ever proven crucial, would be key evidence against the standard conspiracy theory blaming U.S. imperialism for the overthrow because Soros evidently is not one to do the bidding of the Bush administration.

The Georgian revolution was genuine insofar as Shevardnadze's regime had indeed been severely weakened in recent years by the country's internal splits and popular antipathy as well as the active and growing protest movement that had emerged in the streets. Moreover, leaders had appeared who proved capable of brokering a broad

insurgent alliance and inspiring faith in the masses that a better life could be achieved by removing the corrupt old regime. This popular faith explains why in the extraordinary January 2004 presidential elections, the charismatic Mikheil Saakashvili, who was barely 36 years old, won a smashing 97 percent of the votes.

Admittedly, Saakashvili himself shrewdly contributed to the portrayal of his presidency as a latter-day Camelot, if not as a "Return of the King, the blockbuster epic based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* that was serendipitously released in December 2003. Like the valiant prince Aragorn, after long wanderings abroad Saakashvili returned to claim leadership in his wretched native land plundered by the usurpers, and also brought an exotic wife. Sandra Roelofs-Saakashvili is Dutch by birth but has become fluent in Georgian and Russian, which is no small consideration given the cultural and geopolitical environment of her husband's realm. Medieval pageantry surrounded Saakashvili's inauguration, during which he paid homage at the tombs of the Georgian kings of old and prayed at ancient churches. One of the first acts of the new regime was to change Georgia's national flag to the distinctly Christian and monarchical white banner emblazoned with five red crosses. Yet all this fanfare should not be dismissed as mere pageantry. President Saakashvili direly needs to maintain strong charisma because he has few other political assets in what promises to be an uphill battle for a reunited and less corrupt Georgia. The evocation of medieval glories serves to distance Saakashvili from his erstwhile patron Shevardnadze and to heal the wounds in the Georgian national soul left by the civil wars of the early 1990s. The messianic variety of nationalism, whose champion was the first post-Communist president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had been defeated on every front. But its emotional appeal runs among many Georgians, especially in the historical western province of Megrelia from which the Zviadists waged their resistance against Shevardnadze's government. Moreover, the new old flag of Georgia could still prove more acceptable to the ethnic minorities in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and southern Ossetia because there the crimson flag of the Georgian Republic had been tainted by the memories of punitive expeditions conducted by the Georgian nationalist forces in 1918-1920 and again in 1992-1993.

Nevertheless, Saakashvili's main battle must be against Georgia's endemic corruption. During Shevardnadze's tenure, corruption reached exorbitant proportions, threatening to ruin the nascent state, which evidently is the main reason why Shevardnadze's Western friends finally denied him their support. President Saakashvili's two main battlefronts – anticorruption and minority separatism – must be considered in their greater historical context. Both problems have deep roots that extend back decades, if not centuries. This approach, informed by the theories of macrohistorical sociology, gives us two hefty advantages. First, a more rational understanding of how these persistent and exceedingly mythologized problems could help to formulate rational solutions to them. Secondly, an accurate rational diagnosis may provide us hope, and hope matters in politics. Without such rational hope one could just as well despair about seemingly incurable malaise of corruption and separatism – which is, I suspect, what ultimately brought down Shevardnadze despite his once very liberal and westernizing intentions.

Last but not least, this article draws comparisons between Georgia's citizen uprising and the seemingly opposite developments in Azerbaijan and Russia where in October–December 2003 the undeclared dictatorships effectively scattered the liberal oppositions and consolidated their grip on power with the not-entirely-artificial consent of Russian and Azerbaijani voters. The punch line is that in each of these cases we observed different political outcomes of what was in fact the same deep-running social tendencies: inchoate popular anger at post-Communist debacles; hopes vested in the recovery of state protection; and still, after all the disillusionment, aspirations for what they perceive as a normal European life.

## The Georgian Ways

An excursus into the region's historical formation is needed to make sense of what so many baffled foreigners have considered the Georgian cultural exotica. For millennia, the Caucasus has been a brave unyielding rock squeezed between the grinding wheels of the ancient agrarian empires of the Near East and the nomadic waves sweeping from Inner Asia across the Great Steppe. The difficult mountains flanked by the inhospitable Caspian and Black Seas have provided refuge to a great variety of linguistic and cultural groups that are not found anywhere else. The Georgians are one such endemic people.

Throughout its long history Georgia has had a loosely united linguistic and cultural identity but was rarely united under a single political entity. The mountain landscape posed serious obstacles to the extension of an agrarian state and still more daunting was the geopolitics of the region, perennially caught in internecine wars and foreign invasions. Medieval Georgia, however, enjoyed a somewhat better geographical protection in comparison to the continuously trampled-over lands of Armenia and the turbulent plains later called Azerbaijan. The fertile valleys and plateaus of Georgia sustained much larger agrarian populations than the imposing Caucasus mountains to the north where – in the lands of the Chechens, Ossetians, and Circassians – only rudimentary forms of social organization could exist. With this balance of geopolitics and an agrarian base, Georgia could preserve its own knightly aristocracy along with a proto-national network of Orthodox monasteries. Jointly, these institutions maintained a distinctly feudal Georgian high culture. The native nobility was in fact numerous; before 1917 as many as 7 percent of Georgians claimed such titles and, according to the 1897 census, in Tiflis as many as 15.6 percent boasted noble ranks.<sup>1</sup> (This number, however, also included Russian officers at the seat of the imperial vice-royalty.) By comparison, in Western monarchies, the nobility was usually less than 1 percent of the population. (After all, how many peasants did it take to keep their lords comfortable?) A higher rate of ennoblement was found only in Poland, which suggests an interesting hypothesis regarding the historical roots of the distinctly heroic and often unruly character of modern politics in these countries as well as their disproportionate achievements in high culture. The numerical strength of nobility seems itself directly related to the weakness of medieval monarchies that failed to regulate access into the noble ranks, especially during the long periods of strife. Likewise the English Tudor

---

<sup>1</sup> Yuri Anchabadze and Natalia Volkova, *Staryi Tbilisi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), p. 28.

monarchy emerged from the murderous War of the Roses having to acknowledge as generic "gentlemen" a great many rural warlords.

## Peasant Land Rebellions and Ethnic Conflicts

And what about those 93 percent who did not claim nobility? Common folk were predominantly peasants. This being the Caucasus, many peasants, especially in the mountains, traditionally possessed the right to bear arms. Rebellions were as common as the sacred practice of vendetta. The peculiar balance of power between the haughty, petty nobility and the enduring egalitarian pride of Georgian peasants is encapsulated in the wonderfully ridiculous story of a nobleman who owned just one serf whose obligation was to pay his master a half an egg a year. As the story goes, on Easter day this peasant would ceremoniously bring a hard-boiled egg, cut it in half with his own knife, offer one half to the nobleman in confirmation of his feudal rank but keep the other half for himself.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, of course, the picture could not always be as idyllic. The scarcity of arable land has always been the scourge of the Caucasus. During the early twentieth century, in combination with population growth, this scarcity produced a tinderbox of agrarian relations. When the Russian colonial authorities abolished serfdom in the Caucasus as they did elsewhere in the empire in the 1860s, the native peasants received even punier plots than in central Russia because the government had to reward the service nobility first. At this time the population had tripled or even quadrupled as a result of colonial settlement and natural growth following the cessation of wars, the introduction of more productive crops, and basic sanitation. The seething discontent of land-starved peasants burst into open rebellions during the Russian Revolution of 1905 and especially after 1917. The energy of peasant protest fed two intermeshing kinds of politics that dominated the epoch: agrarian socialism and nationalism.

In retrospect, popular memory tends to portray the enormous violence that accompanied the revolutionary turmoil of 1905-1907 and 1917-1921 in broad ethnic strokes because the complicated context of land claims, community relations, and external political alliances has become completely unintelligible with the passing of time. To summarize vastly complex events, in the peripheries of the unraveling Russian Empire in 1917 political power fell mainly in the hands of progressive intelligentsia who perceived their historical mission to uplift the countryside economically through land reforms and rural credit and to educate the peasants in civic modernizing mores. The ultimate goal was to join their emerging nations with Western civilization. In early 1918, as Finland became the first to declare its independence and civil war was engulfing the central provinces of Russia, the national intelligentsias in the Caucasus became convinced that the best vehicle for their aspirations was sovereign national statehood.

This good-hearted project immediately faltered because, once the tsarist police apparatus disappeared, the countryside burst into myriad local revolts coalescing in a veritable jacquerie as various groups of peasants, now armed with the weapons and

---

<sup>2</sup> See Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

fighting skills from the First World War, contested the land rights of the erstwhile landowners, commercial farmers, and among themselves. The newly formed national governments felt compelled to take sides in these bloody confrontations.

Meanwhile, the policies of Western powers proved cruelly disillusioning. The British treated the Georgian *Mensheviks* with a barely concealed disdain for their Germanophile and socialist Second International leanings; suspected the Armenian socialist-revolutionary *Dashnaks* of terrorist tendencies; and refused to take seriously the Azeri secular enlighteners of the *Musavat* government, who had boldly proclaimed the first-ever republic in the Muslim world, opened a modern university in Baku and, years ahead of Turkey, adopted the Latin alphabet for the Azeri Turkic language. (The post-war British security policy for the Middle East, as it was for the Balkans earlier, sought the imposition of indirect rule through the "native" absolutist monarchies, which was achieved rather disastrously in the long run in Iraq, the Gulf principalities, Iran, and Afghanistan.)

Later in 1919, the United Kingdom and France finally gave the aspiring nation states of the Caucasus 12 months to meet the 3 requirements for recognition: proof of historical right to the territory; ethnic-cultural homogeneity of the population (in ethnically disputed areas, plebiscites would be held to determine to which political entity the inhabitants would like to belong); and what, in the legal jargon of the colonial era, was called the right of effective occupation, meaning military and administrative presence in the territory.<sup>3</sup> On the ground, these three liberal clauses meant a new cycle of symbolic and actual violence. Immediately, committees of national scholars began producing evidence of historical greatness (their findings were dusted off after 1989 for the new round of clashing nationalisms, when pre-Soviet origins themselves became regarded as the hallmarks of intellectual pedigree). Meanwhile, small bands of nationalist warriors entered the ethnically mixed and disputed areas to fly the flags of "effective occupation" and shift the population balances to ensure the desired results in coming plebiscites. Because these bands were small and operated on their own much like guerrillas, they often resorted to violent provocations aimed at escalating conflicts between the different ethnic communities and then imposing their protection on their co-national villagers. The brutality of this process approximated the Turkish-Greek population exchanges of the same period.

## **Institutional Containment of Ethnic Separatisms: The Bolshevik Lesson**

The end to these wars came with the Bolshevik Eleventh Red Army that swept from southern Russia into Transcaucasia in 1920. Years later, the anti-Stalinist discourse of perestroika painted the ethnoterritorial decisions of the early 1920s in terms of a devious plan intended to forever divide the nationalities and preclude the democratization of the Soviet state. In light of historical evidence and our contemporary understanding of the cognitive frames that had informed the Bolshevik formative choices, it is doubtful that Stalin or his comrades could have been so farsighted. Contingency played a major role in setting the pattern of Soviet ethnofederalism.

---

<sup>3</sup> Firuz Kazem-zadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951).

The key precedent for ending the ethnic separatist wars was established in 1921 by a decision about the mountainous Karabagh, a small but symbolically cherished location that, despite its remoteness, was an important transportation hub from which one could get to Iran, Turkey, and the Black Sea. . In July 1921, during the first day of deliberations at the Bolshevik Caucasus bureau (Kavburo), it was easily agreed that, following the national aspirations of Armenian people, Karabagh should belong to Soviet Armenia. The next day, however, Karabagh was made an autonomous Armenian province incorporated into Soviet Azerbaijan. This was done because, according to the new party line, industrial progress and proletarian internationalism were the most secure antidotes against the poison of ethnic prejudice. Therefore, the advanced oil industry of Baku should serve the locomotive pulling Karabagh out of backwardness. (Indeed, Armenia at the time had not a single industrial town.)

Telephonic transcripts recently discovered in the Moscow archives by historian Grigory Lezhava reveal a counterintuitive but, in the end, eminently plausible reason behind the overnight reversal of the Kavburo's decision on Karabagh. As it turns out, the initial decision was opposed by the Georgian comrades. The Georgian communists warned that if Azerbaijan were to relinquish its claim over Karabagh, Soviet Georgia, by implication, faced the dismemberment of its territory due to the strong secessionist claims by the Abkhaz, southern Ossetians, and Adjarians (Islamicized Georgians who had been under Ottoman rule for centuries). Given the strength of Georgian patriotism and the pivotal position of the republic, Soviet rule in Transcaucasia could be endangered. Lenin and Stalin then suggested a compromise: all separatist groups must stay but, in consolation, they would be given autonomous homelands created for the mobilized minorities, especially the Abkhaz and Ossetians whose partisans had fought for the Bolsheviks. Because the small size of such autonomous groups was considered an obstacle to their development, they were attached to the larger and more advanced union republics. Soviet Georgia thus obtained three autonomous provinces: Abkhazia, Adjaria, and South Ossetia. The unhappy compromise produced a complicated and inherently contentious hierarchy of administrative competencies, but it defused the immediate issue of political fragmentation and Georgian rebellion. In time, it was then hoped, industrial development and modern education would overcome atavistic parochialism and draw the peoples together.

If we disregard the Bolshevik rhetoric (and its anti-Communist obverse), the pattern of ethnopolitical arrangements and the attendant economic hopes look remarkably similar to the federalist solutions being proposed in our own day by the United States and its NATO allies in the war-ravaged Balkans, the Caucasus, or Iraq for that matter. If we are to avoid certain pitfalls, we need to overcome ideological prejudice and pay more serious attention to the actual dilemmas that the Communist state-builders faced in their time and especially the kind of problems that their solutions tended to create in the long run. Perhaps there is no elegant and satisfying solution to the ethnic separatisms, at least not in the existing world order of nation states. However, we must also acknowledge that Soviet nationality policy had worked for nearly seven decades, which cannot be explained by Stalinist terror alone. Although awkward, the Soviet design remained fairly viable in the middle run because it met three crucial conditions: (1) incorporation into a larger geopolitical entity under (2) an overarching

administrative hierarchy that (3) could direct the flow of economic resources and produce sustained economic growth. Theoretically, therefore, Western plans for settling the recent spate of ethnic conflicts might yet work. Ethnic separatisms can be contained, however, only under a serious and long-term commitment of economic and political resources. Furthermore, there exists plenty of evidence in the modern world that democracy can breed its own problems in a multiethnic setting, especially if decisions are taken to institutionalize ethnic constituencies. Yet there also exists substantial evidence (Belgium, Canada, India) that democratic procedures can contain centrifugal forces at least no less effectively than dictatorship – provided that democratic dispensations lead to tangible economic resources.

## **Industrial Transformation and Its Discontents**

With the passage of time, all institutions tend to assume a life of their own. This applied to the Soviet nomenklatura as much as to the national republics. Under Communist rule, the Caucasus was completely transformed along the lines of Soviet industrial developmentalism. By the 1960s Georgia boasted a vibrant national culture, including a world-class and deeply national cinema, and the highest per capita number of medical personnel in the world. New and much larger groups of intelligentsia and professional specialists emerged during the Soviet period. The new intelligentsia actively exploited the structural opportunities created by Soviet development and generously subsidized nationality policies. The capitals of the union republics were thus transformed into hubs of national intelligentsia who then strove for greater artistic and, eventually, political autonomy. Among the Soviet republics, Georgia was likely the farthest advanced along this vector, which is also why the Moscow rulers were often concerned with Georgian affairs. Since the de-Stalinization drive that began in 1956, however, the methods of control have shifted from terror to pacifying subsidies and a kind of benign neglect on which the Georgian intelligentsia thrived.

The mellowing of the Soviet regime was itself a major self-serving achievement of the communist elite. After Stalin's death in 1953 the nomenklatura no longer had to dread purges and, once the rambunctious Khrushchev was ousted in 1964, the ruling bureaucracy entered a long period of personal stability and relaxation. But overall, the nomenklatura's self-normalization of their status as the ruling elite meant the slow decay of the Soviet state, whose effectiveness since its origins in the Civil War had been premised on dictatorial command and an activist charismatic ideology. But now, with the communist ideology turned into an embalmed mummy of its former self and the bureaucrats free to bargain their own priorities with Moscow, the Soviet state became an aloof inertial mass. The slackening of central supervision, compounded by the absence of independent press and genuine elections, created conditions for the spread of bureaucratic pathologies, including illicit private gains from office or, simply put, corruption.

Soviet Georgia was notorious in this respect. In large part, the advantages of its geographic location and balmy climate fed corruption. As the real wages of the Soviet industrial workforce grew substantially from the late 1950s through the early 1980s, the Georgian countryside developed into a privileged supplier of southern fruits (especially

citrus and grapes) for the northern urban centers starved for fresh produce. Soviet vacationers flocked en masse to the Black Sea resorts each season. Other semi-official and black markets developed as clandestine entrepreneurs were devising ever new ways to exploit the perennial shortages of consumer goods. By all accounts, these activities generated huge flows of cash outside official channels that, for instance, materialized in the ambitious private homes rising in Georgian towns and villages, especially in the sub-tropical zone near the Black Sea. The unofficial markets created numerous opportunities for the police and bureaucratic extortion, private protection, and the misallocation of state resources (construction materials, fertilizers, cars, etc.) in exchange for kickbacks. In turn, the lower echelons of corrupt officials had to buy their offices and protection from their superiors, which created a parallel pyramid of authority siphoning profits from the bottom up and redistributing them through an elaborate network of favor exchanges.

Economic opportunity came compounded with inherited cultural preferences for aristocratic sinecure and status display, which translated into a penchant for stylish clothing, cars, homes, or expensive gifts, feasts, and outgoing hospitality among rich (which in Soviet times inevitably meant corrupt) Georgians. Georgian culture provided plenty such symbolic practices that, in a deviant way, translated into the charismatic preeminence of Georgian professional criminals in the strict hierarchy of the all-Soviet underworld – such Georgians comprised a whopping one-third of the legendary prison elite crowned by their peer outlaws with the highest title of Rightful Thief (*vor v zakone*). One of them, Djaba Ioseliani, later gained a doctorate in cinema history and wrote quite good novels. After 1991 the multi-talented Ioseliani created a nationalist paramilitary force of his own, staged a successful coup, and invited as his ruling partner Eduard Shevardnadze, who, at the time, was the temporarily unemployed, former foreign minister of the disbanded Soviet Union.

## Shevardnadze as a Mirror of His Times

The amazing metamorphoses of Eduard Shevardnadze over his long political career that so mystified his Western friends and admirers might actually have a parsimonious explanation: he has always exhibited an extraordinary intuitive sense of what power meant in different historical contexts. Like Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and former Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliyev, Shevardnadze started a peasant boy and rose along the Soviet career path to the summit of bureaucratic authority. In Stalin's times, he was an up-and-coming ideological functionary. When Khrushchev's massive sackings of Stalinist henchmen from the security apparatus vacated its top positions, Shevardnadze attained the rank of police general. In 1973 he was selected as Georgia's first secretary based on his assiduously cultivated reputation for effectiveness and personal integrity at a point when Moscow had had enough of his predecessor's scandalous abuses. Yet corruption in Georgia continued to flourish unabated. Shevardnadze realized corruption's structural character, but he was always careful not to be implicated in any direct way. This required a coterie of personal loyalists who, under their patron's protection, could discharge their duties to the common benefit of the patronage machine and, naturally, themselves. At the same time, Shevardnadze's rule in Soviet Georgia during the 1970s has earned him a very different reputation –

that of an enlightened Communist leader, unusually tolerant and, on occasion, even protective of Georgian creative artists against the inquisition-like Moscow ideologists. These Janus-like two faces of Shevardnadze directly corresponded to the two major forces in Georgian society at the time: the entrenched national nomenklatura enmeshed in the booming shadow economy, and the numerous and very prestigious Georgian national intelligentsia.

Arguably, Shevardnadze was never an ideological nationalist in his defense of Georgian interests. Rather, he played a benevolent patron to his native republic's elites. Shevardnadze's loyalty to imperial Moscow remained prudently solid and, in fact, he did not hesitate to imprison nationalist dissidents in 1978 when their agitation had threatened to disrupt stability. (One of them, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, son of the classic historical novelist and himself a Shakespearean scholar, would become Georgia's first anti-Communist president in 1991.) Yet Shevardnadze proved savvy enough to sense the change of political mood in Moscow. In a famous episode during the early 1980s, while hosting Gorbachev (who was not yet general secretary) at the Party dacha in Abkhazia, Shevardnadze confided: *It all has rotted*. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze hoped that they could do better in updating the rusted bureaucratic machinery of the USSR than the blindly intransigent reactionaries of Leonid Brezhnev's regime.

### **Tbilisi after April 1989: The First Collapse of Communist Governance**

The standard histories of perestroika overlook the fact that in the entire Soviet bloc Georgia was the first country in which Communist rule had downright collapsed. Even more curious, the numerous wishful critics of Gorbachev who lament his lack of resolve in dealing with nationalist separatisms seem strangely oblivious to the actual results of the attempted use of force against the nationalist rally in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, on April 9, 1989. A paratroop regiment recently withdrawn from Afghanistan was ordered to disperse the frenzied crowd of mostly women, romantic students, and lesser-educated Georgians who were holding a round-the-clock mournful vigil in Tbilisi's central square. (Their main grievance was, significantly, the alleged discrimination against ethnic Georgians in the autonomous republic of Abkhazia.) As the weary Georgian police stood aside, the paratroopers – themselves enraged by the loudly resisting crowd and evidently encouraged by their commanders to show toughness – charged ahead with brutality that left 19 women dead and hundreds of protestors badly bruised and poisoned by a mysterious variety of gas.

The mayhem in Tbilisi marked several turning points in perestroika. First of all, the deeply apprehensive majority of Communist nomenklatura and military command realized that after such an embarrassment Gorbachev would disown any future attempts to crack down on protestors as he had brazenly disowned the paratroop operation in Tbilisi. The exclusive institutional position of the general secretary, however, prevented the hardliners from staging an open collective challenge; therefore, they glumly endured while a growing number of opportunistic bureaucrats began looking for an exit strategy. In Georgia and in many other Soviet republics soon thereafter the national nomenklatura began switching sides from Moscow to the rising nationalist movements and, even more so, from the centrally planned economy to the

individual pursuit of profit in the haphazardly emerging markets. In both strategies the defecting nomenklatura relied on the state assets that they had previously controlled. The de facto privatization of economic and political resources thus emerged mainly from the middle ranks of Communist officialdom and long before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

Among the forces opposed to the bureaucratic Leviathan, the April 1989 events in Tbilisi marked a still more fateful turning point. The Russian democratic intelligentsia felt at a loss and unable to connect with the ethnic crowds that appeared almost totally irrational from Moscow's point of view. In the early years of perestroika the emergent public politics was entirely the domain of high-status intelligentsia. Their tremendous symbolic success, however, started the mechanism of competitive emulation. As the censorship visibly receded, the lesser-status intellectuals (junior scholars and journalists, provincial teachers, eccentric autodidacts, unrecognized poets, or Bohemian artists such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia or Djaba Ioseliani) made evermore daring pronouncements seeking to outflank the established intellectuals who commanded public attention. Besides, these less-established intellectuals had no careers to sacrifice. Crude populist rhetoric obtained its strongest resonance in the typically nationalist emotions of collective victimization and frustrated national ambitions.

By early 1989, Georgia's previously marginalized radical intellectuals had succeeded in mobilizing a substantial following against the special privileges of the minority autonomous provinces, mainly Abkhazia, and by implication, Communist rule as such. Beyond the symbolic offense to national sovereignty, this grievance rang true among many common Georgians who felt that their economic opportunities had been stymied by Abkhaz control over state offices and the police apparatus in the extraordinarily rich, sub-tropical province, where the ethnic Abkhaz were only 17 percent of the population while ethnic Georgians comprised almost one half. This directly translated into the widespread outrage at the pervasive corruption in the government apparatus that essentially imposed a heavy unofficial tax on the common farmers, truck drivers, and market vendors. Nationalism gained force by tapping into class and status contradictions; in the aftermath of the bloody night of April 1989, the popular outrage reached truly revolutionary proportions. The Georgian nomenklatura panicked after Moscow's disastrous intervention, while the liberal intelligentsia was completely eclipsed by the "madness" of their radical competitors. Merab Mamardashvili, the Georgian expatriate philosopher who had achieved guru status among the Moscow intelligentsia, summed up the attitude: "If this is the choice of my people, then I am against the people!" Shortly afterward, he died of heart failure.

To many people, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze appeared absorbed with foreign diplomacy and strangely oblivious to the catastrophic unraveling of governance in Georgia (as well as in its neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan). This view was rather naïve, however. Feeling powerless against the nationalist mobilizations in the Caucasus and other republics, they resorted to covert operations intended to deny outright

---

<sup>4</sup> See Steven Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) and David Woodruff, *Money Unmade: Barter and the Fate of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

success to the nationalists. The Abkhaz and South Ossetian resistance against the eruption of Georgian nationalism was not at all artificial. Yet there is plenty of circumstantial evidence suggesting that Moscow had encouraged, financed, and eventually armed these and other minority nationalisms with the intention of using them to help thwart secessions by union republics. These last-resort operations contributed mightily to starting the actual warfare.

Instead of a deep and rapid transformation of political structures that could potentially restore the legitimacy and effectiveness of central governance, the democratic revolutionary situation that began in spring 1989 produced a long and utterly destructive stalemate that lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In many successor republics power struggles lasted well into the 1990s, finally curbed by Yeltsin's coercive abolition of Russia's transitional parliament in October 1993 and the curtailment of Georgia's civil wars in early 1994. In Chechnya, however, the destructive stalemate continues.

## **The Second Coming of Shevardnadze**

In 1992 Shevardnadze returned to preside over independent Georgia. The country was in political and physical collapse, its industrial and social infrastructure cut off from Soviet-era supplies and largely deserted by managers and unpaid workers. And still to come was the country's grievous failed attempt to reconquer Abkhazia, followed by the exodus of Georgian refugees from the rebellious province and another bout of intra-Georgian civil war, which took an expedient dispatch of Russian marines to maintain Shevardnadze's position and the territorial integrity of Georgia's remaining heartland after the military separation of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the self-insulation of the traditionally Muslim Adjara. The military debacles, however, discredited the nationalist warlords and by 1995 gave Shevardnadze the opportunity to restore a modicum of civilian rule.

Although seemingly an idealistic exaggeration, personal connections with Western statesmen had often been considered Shevardnadze's main asset. The European Union and the United States were primarily interested in reducing the geopolitical and economic costs of access to oil from the landlocked Caspian Sea. From this strategic perspective, Georgia seemed an asset worth maintaining. Aid followed, although mostly in the form of loans rather than charity. As in the case of Karabagh, the minority separatism of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara was checked by the West's firm refusal to recognize further national declarations of independence. At the same time, the already recognized national governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan were strongly dissuaded from trying to regain their rebellious provinces by force. The conflicts thus remained frozen in endless rounds of international mediation.

In the new era of global capitalist markets, Shevardnadze has once again proven himself Janus-faced. Yet he is not the only one. Yeltsin, Azerbaijan's former president Heidar Aliyev, and Ukraine's Leonid Kuchma have proven no less duplicitous. The source of their duplicity is not cultural, as some Western critics like to claim, but structural. Such rulers have to mediate between the exigencies of Western agencies

enforcing global market discipline and their domestic bases of power that rest on the clienteles of venal office holders and patronized local magnates.

In the 1990s, Shevardnadze fell back on the network of his old nomenklatura clients and their corrupt patronage in order to reassemble at least some sort of governance. This time around, however, his own foreign patrons were much less generous than Moscow had been in the 1970s, while Shevardnadze's domestic clients who no longer feared reprisal remained as scandalously corrupt as ever. After the disbursement of all foreign loans, the sales of luxury cars in Tbilisi and luxury villas on the picturesque hills overlooking the city would rise, while electricity supplies became chronically sporadic because the country could not pay its utility bills. Following the internecine wars, infrastructure collapse, and the opening of Russian markets to citrus and grapes from around the world, Georgia lost its key Soviet-era sources of prosperity. The countryside largely reverted to subsistence while the urban populations, with unemployment at over 20 percent, sought sustenance in the informal economy or through emigration: between 1989 and 2003 Georgia's population fell from 5.5 million to 4.4 million, and 750 thousand Georgians were estimated to work in Russia. Supporting a modern state with tax revenues in this situation was, and remains, problematic.

Keeping up appearances for the West had to be Shevardnadze's other strategy. During one of his trips to New York, he met the young Mikheil Saakashvili who was studying law and public policy at Columbia University on a stipend from the U.S. Congress. Saakashvili looked as energetic and ambitious as any law student at an elite American school; he was fluent in English, including technocratic jargon, and married to a polyglot Dutch wife who was willing to relocate to her husband's motherland. At the age of 28, Shevardnadze secured for his new protégé a parliamentary seat and soon made him the Georgian minister of justice. Shevardnadze also added to his Western-oriented façade Zurab Zhvania, the former leader of the short-lived Green Party who had proven effective as speaker of Parliament, and the judicious and well-polished Nino Burdjanadze, daughter of Shevardnadze's old wealthy friend in the bread business.

However, cracks began emerging as the Westernized cosmopolitans banded together in a political faction opposing the corrupt domestic loyalists in Shevardnadze's court. The audacious Saakashvili displayed photos of the ostentatious homes of his fellow cabinet members at a government meeting. Although it was quietly understood that such things took place, it was still shocking, and Saakashvili had to be sacked. Saakashvili's firing was one of the mounting indicators of trouble in Shevardnadze's rule – other indicators included strikes by public servants, military mutinies over unpaid wages, massive jail breakouts, abductions of prominent personalities and Westerners for ransom, and the existence of the lawless Pankisi Gorge just a couple hours from Tbilisi, where Chechen guerrillas were rumored to host elements of Al Qaeda.

Once again, the usual psychological and cultural explanations blaming Shevardnadze's old age or the especially unruly character of the proud but presumably ungovernable Georgian nation are lacking any analytical merit. In mundane reality, Georgia's GDP is almost twice as small as Albania's and, in per capita terms, is less than

\$700. Shevardnadze was caught between his fabulously rapacious clients who had privatized whatever remained of the state and the angry impoverished citizenry who refused to accept their status at the bottom of the world's income hierarchy. Yet these factors alone were not sufficient cause for revolution. Moreover, Shevardnadze had been famously astute in his maneuverings to stay in power. He managed to placate Russia about Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge, which had nearly provoked war at one point, and by accepting U.S. military instructors he adroitly managed to shift to the United States the burden of explaining to Moscow who should fight Al Qaeda in the first place. In spring 2003 a British Petroleum-led consortium at long last began building the ambitious pipeline that should bring Azerbaijan's oil and natural gas across Georgian territory to the world market and open a large new source of revenue. The remaining thorny issue was the November 2003 parliamentary elections that had to be held for the West to see. But Shevardnadze left the vote counting to his clients, whose vested interests seemed obvious.

A national survey conducted in late November/early December 2003 provides a glimpse of the social mechanisms involved in the sudden fall of Shevardnadze's regime.<sup>5</sup> More than 63 percent of respondents claimed to have university education and an almost equal number considered themselves middle class. At the same time, the majority reported income levels of less than one or two dollars a day, which is on par with Haiti. General mistrust of authorities was also indicated by an expressed reluctance to turn to official legal channels. When asked to whom they would turn if their rights were violated, 77 percent of respondents named friends and acquaintances as their first choice, and 71 percent said relatives. Almost one-tenth named criminals as their preferred source for adjudication of disputes, while only 46 percent said that they would ever consider the courts. The vast majority (92.4 percent) believed that the results of the November elections were rigged. (A June 2003 survey cited in this study showed that, as early as June, 61 percent of respondents were convinced that the November parliamentary elections would be rigged.)<sup>6</sup> But there was little expectation of regime change, and even among the educated urbanites the positive rating of Saakashvili had remained around 30 percent. Following the November elections, Saakashvili's popularity rose sharply when his charismatic activism offered the bitterly disillusioned voters hope that change was possible after all. Finally, the responses to the discourse of Saakashvili and his allies, Zhvania and Burdjanadze, show that nationalism was expressed in fairly mild terms and played a minor role. The key grievances of the November 2003 uprising were indeed reminiscent of the nineteenth-century days of the insurgent and popularly based liberalism: the rule of law against the venality of office, roads open to talents against the corrupt hold on privileges, rather nebulous promises of social amelioration, and progressive reforms that had been blocked by the old regime. Sensing the trend, in the January 2004 elections the deposed Shevardnadze himself came to the polling station to vote for his rebellious adopted progeny and wished him success.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nana Sumbadze and George Tarkhan-Mouravi, "Public Opinion in Tbilisi: In the Aftermath of the Parliamentary Elections of November 2, 2003," Institute for Policy Studies, Tbilisi, December 2003, [http://psigeorgia.org/undpsa/files/IPS\\_Survey\\_Nov\\_percent202003.pdf](http://psigeorgia.org/undpsa/files/IPS_Survey_Nov_percent202003.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Sumbadze and Tarkhan-Mouravi, "Public Opinion in Tbilisi," p. 4.

## Azerbaijan and Russia: Promising Better Life through Plebescetarian Authoritarianism

*Ad contrario*, the political outcome in neighboring Azerbaijan supports my contention that, by revolution or counterrevolution, the main emerging trend in the former Soviet republics is toward the popularly acclaimed (but not necessarily democratically elected) younger and more vigorous leaders who promise a return to normalcy. Azerbaijan in 2003 underwent its own generational change that, in spite of the intervening oppositional rebellion, has been successfully managed by the ruling patronage machine. In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan also experienced a nationalist revolution and the war in Karabagh, which brought state structures to the brink of collapse. At this point Heidar Aliyev jumped in the fray and gradually rebuilt the state around his personalistic regime. In many respects he was a politician similar to Shevardnadze, though reportedly even shrewder and judiciously ruthless. The older Aliyev started his career under Stalin and became a KGB general with the reputation of being a corruption buster, which in 1969 helped him become the first secretary of Azerbaijan after Moscow had had enough of his predecessor's scandalous abuses. During the 1970s Aliyev patronized Azerbaijan's intelligentsia and condoned corruption among his subordinates in exchange for their loyalty. Aliyev's bad luck was in getting elected to the Politburo on Brezhnev's recommendation and failing to make friends with Gorbachev. In 1987 Aliyev was rusticated but returned to power after 1993 in independent and devastated Azerbaijan.

The astute political maneuvering and generous earnings from Azerbaijan's oil resources allowed Heidar Aliyev to restore public order, balance multiple foreign influences, and build a solid patronage machine that he was openly preparing to bequeath to his son, Ilham. Yet nature intervened in the schedule of dynastic succession. In April 2003 Aliyev collapsed in the middle of a public speech, which was the last time he was seen in public. When it was announced that President Aliyev had been flown for treatment to a hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, the Azerbaijani opposition cried loudly that the old man had actually died but could not prove the allegation.

The Azerbaijani opposition in recent years has been larger and more active than that in Georgia, and like everywhere else in the post-Soviet lands, was led by Westernizing intellectuals and disgruntled elements of the nomenklatura. Yet it was plagued by personal rivalries and failed to appeal successfully to the masses. Presidential elections were held in Azerbaijan on October 15 and, amidst accusations of fraud, Ilham Aliyev was declared the victor by a landslide. Opposition activists went to the streets of Baku and clashed with police, but evidently the Aliyevs had been paying their police better than Shevardnadze had. The protestors were badly beaten and hundreds were imprisoned. Worse, the opposition leaders engaged in bitter mutual recriminations over their defeat. Having proven to the country and the world that he was now the Azerbaijani state, in December 2003, Ilham Aliyev officially announced the death of his father. The state funeral was attended by nearly a million Azerbaijanis whose grief, according to witnesses, appeared a genuine testament to Aliyev's paternalistic rule. The moral of this story is that the post-communist state in Azerbaijan works in its own harsh and, judging by the emerging evidence, corrupt ways but it does work at least to

the extent that it allows a significant proportion of the population to maintain their hopes of stability and protection.

The recent political reordering in Russia merits a separate analysis. Here we only need to notice the deeper similarity of historical movers. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin, rather than his neoliberal and social democratic opponents, has succeeded in mobilizing the same diffuse popular yearnings for stability and recovery after a decade of brutal socioeconomic upheaval and national humiliation. The selective undoing of oligarchic political capitalism inherited from Yeltsin's regime serves two simultaneous purposes: eliminating the most resource-rich and therefore potentially dangerous rivals while presenting to the Russian population the spectacle of reborn state authority that punishes the notorious looters of public property. It remains to be seen, however, whether Putin's punitive campaign can return economic assets to effective public control and reduce corruption by purely police measures. In general, Putin seems to be pursuing a conservative course that combines a partial restoration of Soviet-era political practices and symbols of power. This course is now centered around the official nationalist rather than Communist discourse, movement toward state capitalism, the tentative gathering of former Soviet republics under Russia's economic and military tutelage, and cautious rapprochement with France and especially Germany (which holds the bulk of Russia's debt) as Moscow tries to play on German-American differences. Nobody, evidently including Putin himself, can guess at the moment how Moscow's course will develop along any of these vectors.

## The Promises of President Saakashvili

As for Georgia's prospects, Saakashvili will surely need all his youthful zeal, political luck, inventiveness, and popular support to stay on the course that he has charted, all the more so because some of Saakashvili's endeavors run contrary to the great power revanchism of Putin's Moscow (especially regarding Georgia's sovereignty over the separatist autonomies that now exist as Russia's de facto protectorates). The fact that the two presidents are so different in their temperament and life experience does not bode well for the much weaker Caucasian republic.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore Mikheil Saakashvili will have to learn quickly how to maneuver between his major foreign concerns: the United States, Russia, and the EU. One can only wish that any plans on the West's part to involve Georgia in military cooperation or regain the lost ethnic provinces inflict no further damage to Georgia's strained relations with Russia.

Reigning in corruption is not hopeless, however. Georgia does have a vibrant unofficial press, and its citizens are now much less resigned to this traditional malaise and more aware of their collective power. The latter is perhaps the most significant outcome of the November revolution. The upsurge of popular support that brought Saakashvili to power potentially creates an alternative base of authority from which the

---

<sup>7</sup> A very sharp analysis of Moscow's often irrational attitudes toward Georgia is provided in Pavel Baev, "Russia's Virtual War against Georgia: Risks of a PR Offensive," PONARS Policy Memo 251 (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2002).

new president may conduct his anticorruption purge. There should be more than enough young Georgians who, like their president, are well educated, cosmopolitan while patriotic, and inspired by the ideology of the rule of law. If Saakashvili succeeds in incorporating these young cadres in a reasonably paid functioning bureaucracy, as he proclaims is his major goal, the new regime could escape the trap of domestic dependency on venal potentates.

It might then become possible to implement rational economic reforms and move Georgia from the bottom of the world income scale, closer to Hungary than Haiti. For instance, the combination of enviable geography (soft climate, beaches, spas, mountains) and the large number of medical personnel suggest that Georgia could receive year-round vacationers from the wealthier and aging countries of the North. Exotic Georgian wines, if a rationally organized system of quality control and export could be devised, could find their niche on the world market and assure many jobs in Georgia's countryside. And Georgian film industry, music, and football, once among the proudest Georgian products in the Soviet bloc, could once again provide joy and national pride in a larger world.

Such projects might not sound very revolutionary but recovering several million humans from extreme poverty and humiliation might be in itself an inspiring example in a part of the world wrecked by recent political and economic catastrophes.

Last but not least, if Mikheil Saakashvili survives and makes good on his optimistic promises, the Georgian example could yet make the tyrannical presidents in other post-Soviet republics tremble. Revolution could be contagious.