2002-03

Helping Georgia?

Areshidze, Irakly G.

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3599

Boston University
Three factors determine Georgia's political development: the nature of the country's relations with Russia and with the United States; the weakness of the Georgian state; and the struggle to succeed President Eduard Shevardnadze. Each of these factors has been significantly influenced by the Bush administration's decision to send US military advisors to train and equip a unit of the Georgian army. Many Georgians view America's renewed commitment as a means of protecting their independence and territorial integrity from Russian threats, and have placed high hopes on the mission, which constitutes a very significant step forward, but only an initial one. It must be followed by expansion of US-Georgian military cooperation, and a strengthening of other political institutions. Finally, the US assistance bolsters Shevardnadze, but what impact this will have on Georgia's domestic scene remains an open question.

The US Train and Equip Mission in Georgia

In February the Pentagon announced a plan to deploy American soldiers to train approximately 1,200 men in Georgia to help fight the war against terrorism. Ostensibly, the trained forces are to combat terrorists in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, a region that borders Chechnya and is the home to the Kisti, ethnically Chechen Georgian citizens, and thousands of Russian citizens who have fled the Chechen war. Some analysts believe that Pankisi also is home to Chechen rebels, including the forces of Ruslan Gelaev. Over the last two years, there have been several hostage-taking incidents in which the victims were taken to Pankisi Gorge; all were resolved peacefully, usually with the participation of local Kisti elders.
Russia, which regards virtually all Chechen fighters as terrorists, repeatedly used allegations that Chechen fighters were present in Pankisi as a means of pressuring Georgia. This pressure intensified dramatically after 11 September, and Russian planes bombed Georgia in November 2001 and February 2002. US President George W. Bush continuously has reaffirmed his commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, and the administration had warned Russia not to invade Georgia with Pankisi as a pretext. However, Georgians and Americans knew all too well that words alone would not deter Russia forever. According to Georgian officials, Bush assured Shevardnadze of substantive assistance in dealing with Pankisi during the latter's visit to Washington in October 2001. Georgian diplomat David Soumbadze told The Washington Post that Shevardnadze "was promised there would be a program of training and even providing some equipment. There was no detailed discussion about when and how."(2) According to a number of confidential but reliable Georgian sources, securing financing for the mission was expected to take a long time, since money was tied up in various appropriations. Connecting the training operation in Georgia to Operation Enduring Freedom was seen as one way to speed up financial support.

In December, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Tbilisi and discussed potential US military assistance. In early February, the US interim charge d'affaires, Philip Remler, told Georgian media that terrorists connected to al Qaeda might be hiding in Pankisi.(3) This and similar claims gave the Bush administration a way to link the mission to train Georgian forces with the global war on terrorism.

When American media first reported the planned US deployment in Georgia on February 27, 2002, the majority of the Georgian population was ecstatic; it seemed as if D-Day No. 2 was about to unfold. A poll taken in Tbilisi by Georgian Opinion Research Business International (GORBI) after the Pentagon announcement showed that 51 percent of the population supported Georgia's cooperation with the US, while 27 percent favored working with Russia -- this notwithstanding the fact that 70 percent expected Georgia-Russian relations to suffer as a result, and results from a previous poll (December 2001) which showed 46 percent of Georgians wishing to see the country
oriented toward Russia, compared to 13 percent supporting a pro-American orientation. (The dramatic drop in America's rating in 2001 was explained by Georgians' perception that America was supporting failed reform policies.)(4)

**US-Georgian and Russian-Georgian Relations**

Surprisingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin reacted mildly to the American announcement, calling it "no tragedy." "Why should they [the U.S. forces] be in Central Asia and not in Georgia?" he asked.(5) However, most Russian officials were less relaxed. Foreign Minister Sergei Ivanov was quoted widely as saying that "we think it could further aggravate the situation in the region, which is difficult as it is." Boris Nemtsov, leader of the supposedly liberal forces in the Russian Duma, declared that "Georgia's neighbors are not the Americans, but Russia, where hundreds of thousands of Georgian citizens work." He also claimed that Shevardnadze was pursuing "an absolutely crazy policy by orienting the country only towards the U.S."(6) The Russian Duma discussed the situation in Georgia for days, considering, among other questions, whether Russia should recognize the independence of secessionist Abkhazia in response to the American deployment. *Time* declared that Moscow was "hopping mad."(7)

The Russian reaction had little to do with this particular American deployment. The $64 million that America will spend on this mission is unlikely to create even a semblance of a strong army which could secure Pankisi on its own, much less pose a threat to Russia in any way, even in Abkhazia. However, imperialists in Moscow cannot bear the symbolic meaning of the American action and its long-term implications. There has been, for example, much talk in Washington, Tbilisi and Moscow about the possibility that a Western military base will be built in Georgia. While this is unlikely to happen in the immediate future, the train and equip mission could be a precursor. Indeed, the train and equip program will only have real impact if it is followed by other, more serious US military assistance to Georgia; this is a truth that all three sides (Georgians, Americans and Russians) know very well.
The symbolic nature of the American mission cannot be overstated either. Shevardnadze has been slowly, meticulously, yet very successfully, taking Georgia out of the Russian orbit, toward America. The US mission announcement was the latest and clearest sign of the success of his policy. As a result, America's decision to help Georgia has strengthened the president in domestic politics, and helped him escape apparent political isolation. What the US involvement will mean for the strengthening of the Georgian state, however, is not fully clear.

The Weakness of the Georgian State

In recent years Georgia has been called often, inaccurately, a "failed state."(8) Georgia is an example of a "weak state," which Ghia Nodia says is a country "that meets the minimalist functions of a state through all or in most of its territory but is seriously challenged in its capacity to implement some major state functions and policies that have been reasonably well defined by political actors and are expected from its own population."(9) Georgia does not control two significant portions of its territory -- Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- and only barely controls Adjaria. The regime also is unable to meet many responsibilities assigned to it by Georgia's current Constitution--such as collection of tax revenue, protection of natural political rights and prosecution of criminals.

These difficulties notwithstanding, the Georgian state today is stronger than it was seven years ago:

An armed militia, Mkhedrioni, which played a key role in the ouster of Georgia's first freely elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, no longer roams the country harassing the population;

There is no longer a threat of civil war;
Some basic institutions (such as the media) of a stable and just political regime have
developed;

The economy has largely stabilized, and some legitimate business is able to prosper,
though much of the economy remains in the extralegal, not-reported sector; and,

A small middle class has developed and is growing.

Considering this evidence, calling Georgia a failed state in the sense of some African
countries (e.g., Somalia) ignores the dramatic improvements that have been brought
about during President Shevardnadze's tenure. Yet it is impossible to ignore the fact that
these accomplishments are extremely fragile, and are very dependent on
Shevardnadze's personality. If Shevardnadze were to leave office suddenly, Georgia
easily could return to a state of civil war, as in the early 1990s.

Creating a real army, a process that only begins with the American train and equip
program, can play a critical role in strengthening the Georgian state. However, this
process also requires a social contract amongst the citizens and with the political
community. A social contract allows citizens to recognize the regime's authority to rule
and enables the regime to recognize the right of citizens to be free in all those aspects
of life which they did not concede to the government. In Georgia, citizens view the
government as an entity to which they owe no allegiance and with which they have no
connection. This can be partly explained by the demise of civil society in the post-
Communist land, as Charles Fairbanks has argued convincingly.(10) However, there is
a more immediate reason-the mode through which the Georgian Constitution, in which
the social contract is generally enshrined, was written and developed. To serve as a
social contract, the Constitution requires consent from those over whom it is to govern
and it must conform to the mores of the citizens. In Georgia, the granting of consent
never took place-the Constitution was written in 1995 without any discussion or dialogue
among the population, and the population never ratified it-nor does it correspond to the
historical traditions of the Georgian people.
The best, and the only, way to strengthen the Georgian state is to begin a political dialogue that can lead to the development of a social contract among the Georgian citizens. This will result in an agreement on what citizens expect from government, and what sort of obligations and responsibilities they wish to place on the regime. Furthermore, such a dialogue will lead to an agreement on what the citizens are willing to pay, both financially and politically, to give the government the powers to meet its obligations. This process will ultimately lead to a new Constitution for Georgia. Only such a process will help ensure a safe and successful transition of power in 2005, when Shevardnadze leaves office.

**The Post-Shevardnadze Succession**

There are currently three forces competing for power: Revival, a political block led by Aslan Abashidze; the so-called "Reformist Team" of Zurab Zhvania and Michael Saakashvili; and a political party called New Rights, whose principal leader is David Gamkrelidze. The local government elections, which might take place this summer (they are scheduled for June, but have been postponed before), and the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2003, will serve as precursors to the presidential race in 2005. Parties that win these races will be seen automatically as having the leading candidates to succeed Shevardnadze, yet ultimately, victory will be dependent on their ability to work with, rather than against, the president.

The Revival block, and its leader Abashidze, who governs Adjaria, possess financial strength and guaranteed votes in Adjaria, where free elections do not take place. As a result, Revival will remain an important part of the parliament after the next elections. However, analysts suggest that Abashidze fully understands that Tbilisi's elite will never accept him as president and maintains a national political presence only to ensure that the authorities do not threaten his rule in Adjaria.

Zhvania-Saakashvili's Reformist Team owes its role in Georgian politics to Shevardnadze, but the former speaker of parliament and former justice minister broke
with the president about a year ago, possibly because they realized that Shevardnadze would never anoint either of them as his successor. Zhvania is now fighting for the control of Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG), the former governing party that Shevardnadze created in the early 1990s, and probably will have to join Saakashvili’s National Movement for Democratic Reform, where he will be forced to play second fiddle. Saakashvili’s popularity today, meanwhile, is built on radical populism, with ideas that remind many Georgians who are over 30 of communism, such as a call for a law mandating confiscation of illegally acquired property which leaves the burden of proof on the accused individual.

The New Rights Party, whose political base builds on a growing middle class, entrepreneurs and a strong regional network, arose in 1999, when most of Georgia's big businessmen withdrew their support for CUG and started to build their own political force. Their key strengths are financial resources, a leadership untainted by corruption and a unique ideology. Unlike any other force in Georgia, the New Rights Party advocates classical liberal policies-minimal government, maximum freedom, less government regulations, more individual responsibility. The party is also well served by the fact that it does not have a leading personality, unlike Zhvania-Saakashvili's or Abashidze's teams, but is instead built around a political philosophy. Its biggest weakness is the political youth of its leaders. However, with the presidential elections not scheduled until 2005, they have an opportunity to gain significant political experience by taking a leading role in lawmaking in parliament, as they have been over the last year, and by building close relationships with the political elite in the West, especially the United States, before any of them vies for the top office.

Each of these forces is now looking for support from Shevardnadze, whose indispensability to Georgia was only confirmed by America's new military mission. Whom he will endorse is not clear, but his move might very well determine the future of Georgia’s democracy. If the president continues to use various political forces in a game against each other, it is unlikely that progress toward a strong and democratic succession can be achieved. However, unlike Russia’s Boris Yel'tsin, if Shevardnadze
feels secure enough to allow a democratic group to grow, (something like the "New Right") to grow, the country might achieve a real political transition in 2005 which will finally move it toward building liberal democracy in Georgia.

NOTES

(1) Irakly Areshidze, director of the Chavchavadze Center for the Study of Constitutionalism and Law at the Partnership for Social Initiatives (PSI) (www.psigeorgia.org) in Tbilisi, is a Visiting Fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of the School for Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC.


(3) Paul Quinn-Judge, "Jihad Comes to Georgia," Time Europe, 15 February 2002.

(4) PrimeNewsOnline, 28 February 2002.

(5) "Russia's Putin says US forces in Georgia 'no tragedy,'" Reuters English News Service, 1 March 2002.


Copyright Boston University Trustees 2002
Unless otherwise indicated, all articles appearing in this journal have been commissioned especially for Perspective. This article was originally published at http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol12/arashidze.html.