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The Rose Revolution and the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict: light at the end of the tunnel?

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Over ten years have passed since the signing of a ceasefire that marked an end to large-scale hostilities in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Yet a lasting peace settlement remains a distant prospect, and ongoing conflict continues profoundly to affect political and economic development in the region. Large numbers of people, many of whom are displaced, continue to live a precarious existence. Positions remain intransigent, insecurity and lack of trust continue to underpin attitudes, and belligerent rhetoric reinforces a conflict dynamic that leaves little room for engagement with the other side, let alone compromise.

In spite of this, it is unhelpful to talk of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as 'frozen'. The fragile status quo has been subject to constant fluctuations in tension, including major outbreaks of violence in 1998 and 2001 that threatened to trigger a resumption of hostilities. And, particularly over the last year, the region has witnessed dramatic political fluidity that necessarily has inevitable implications for the peace process. While there has been slow progress in the official negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations, a new dynamism has been evident on the part of the international community recently. As yet, there has been little to suggest readiness on the part of the political leaderships in Georgia and Abkhazia, for different reasons, to engage anew with the basic issues that underlie the conflict or take the risks necessary to create fresh possibilities in the peace process. To what extent do recent political changes in the region now allow for this?

Georgia - how rosy the aftermath?

In November 2003, though few would have predicted it, President Shevardnadze exited the political stage in Georgia amid scenes of widespread public support for change. If the public were largely mobilized around disillusionment in Shevardnadze's leadership, his

successor, Mikheil Saakashvili, was quick to make capital from this. The figurehead of the so-called Rose Revolution, he was elected as Georgia's third post-independence president in January 2004 with a resounding majority from a high turnout. The wave of optimism and sense of popular empowerment following the November events has carried over into an endorsement of his agenda for change.

These are early days to judge whether Saakashvili will live up to the expectations of his fellow citizens, and indeed of many in the international community. Without doubt he has a serious reform agenda, and he has been proactive in setting out to prove that Georgia is serious about democratization and reviving the economy and public service provision. Yet the new president and his National Movement were ill-prepared for such a sudden rise to power. There are few signs of a comprehensive strategy on the part of the new government, which is predominantly young and inexperienced. And crucially, the myriad problems that led to such widespread dissatisfaction with Shevardnadze remain.

The first major test to Saakashvili's leadership has been the situation in Ajara. This predominantly Muslim region on the southeast Black Sea coast was for years semi-independent of Tbilisi under its charismatic autocrat Aslan Abashidze. In an attempt to assert his authority, Saakashvili confronted Abashidze head on, challenging his control over the electoral process in Ajara. Saakashvili stated in no uncertain terms that 'in case of a threat to Georgia's territorial integrity, we will use force without hesitation.' He appealed to parliament for authorization to disarm 'illegal armed groups,' leading to speculation about possible military intervention. In the event, Abashidze relinquished his control and left for Russia, and serious violence was averted.

The stand-off is illustrative of Saakashvili's leadership style. He projects the image of a strong leader backed by a loyal army and with Georgian unity at the heart of his political agenda. This image is certainly in keeping with the steps that Saakashvili has taken to shore up presidential power since his election. With surprisingly little consultation he has introduced constitutional changes that ensure the president a disproportionate degree of power and greatly diminish parliament's role. He has also postponed local elections until 2005 and preserved a system whereby heads of local government are appointed by the president, arguing the need for a temporary consolidation of central control. The results of the March parliamentary elections, in which the National Movement won the majority of seats, fuel fears that democratic institutions are growing weaker under Saakashvili. His

approach to the corruption issue has also been telling. While decisive and bold in tackling this much-needed reform, Saakashvili has been willing to turn a blind eye to the rule of law: a number of prominent officials have been arrested in the glare of media publicity and with little regard for due process.

An emotive and populist politician, who tends to be swayed by what his audience would like to hear, Saakashvili has been liberal with his promises. As the dust settles following the euphoria of last November, many are now beginning to ask whether he can deliver. Hardly surprisingly, cracks are appearing between Saakashvili and his prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, and the parliamentary election turnout may indicate that public support is beginning to wane. Certainly, the new president faces an uphill struggle in addressing the challenges of governing Georgia, and the next six months will be crucial in determining the direction his leadership will take.

Abkhazia - end of an era

The government of Abkhazia has been keeping a watchful eye on the developments in Tbilisi and sizing up the new president. Shevardnadze's departure and the avoidance of major instability and violence in Tbilisi were greeted with relief but also wariness. Shevardnadze was a known quantity; Saakashvili is far from predictable.

Adding to this sense of nervousness is the anticipation of significant internal political change in Abkhazia, which though unrecognized by the international community has now enjoyed de facto independence for ten years. This autumn, presidential elections will mark the end of Vladislav Ardzinba's term in office and the first change in the Abkhaz leadership since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In a region in which personalities continue to dominate politics, the succession will be key in determining Abkhazia's future direction.

In anticipation of the election, political debate has grown increasingly vibrant over the last year. A change of government in 2003 brought a number of younger politicians to the fore. Yet tensions within the executive, exacerbated by the president's chronic ill-health, have led to a degree of paralysis in the system of governance. Demands that Ardzinba step down were largely articulated by Amtsakhara, one of the larger political movements. These have now abated, and it is likely he will serve out his term.

Tensions between the executive and legislative branches of power have

also become more evident as parliament seeks to assert its power. In February this year a law was finally passed on a mechanism for amending the constitution. This had essentially been vetoed by the president for some time -- and may have a significant impact on the forthcoming election campaign. One element of the presidential election law currently being debated involves a clause in the constitution requiring any candidate to have been resident in Abkhazia for five years preceding the election. If the restriction is removed, this would open the way for candidates from among the Moscow diaspora and would widen the race. Also controversial has been debate on a draft language law. As in Georgia, there are tensions between promoting an ethno-national agenda (particularly in the face of the perceived threat to Abkhaz language and identity) and democratic reform. Since a significant proportion of the population is non-Abkhaz speaking (including many of the large Armenian community in Abkhazia), talk of introducing wider use of the language has prompted fierce debate.

Candidates for president will be formally announced when the election date is set later this month. Eight to ten individuals are currently in the running, though the number may decrease with the emergence of a new political movement, United Abkhazia, that brings together several potential candidates with the aim of fielding only one of them. Others that may put forward candidates include Aitaira, the first explicitly oppositional movement with a liberal-democratic reform agenda; Akhiatsa, a broadly centrist movement; and Amtsakhara, a movement that initially grew out of a concern for the social rights of ex-combatants.

The intense political debates of recent years have been taking place against the backdrop of ever closer relations with Russia. In spite of the fact that many feel uncomfortable doing so, significant numbers of the current population of Abkhazia have taken Russian passports in order to be able to travel to Russia and beyond. Increasingly, in spite of official Russian support for the CIS trade restrictions, Abkhazia has been drawn further into Russia’s economic orbit. Abkhazia's infrastructure is weak, the majority of the population have no sources of income, and Russian investment has been welcomed. There are politicians and public figures who argue that perpetual isolation is dangerous for Abkhazia and that it is necessary to build a state worthy of the respect of the international community. Yet because of its unrecognized status Abkhazia has few ties apart from its link with Russia. The CIS peacekeeping force that patrols the ceasefire zone is made up entirely of Russian Federation soldiers. To many (though by

no means all) in Abkhazia, Russia is perceived as the one source of military and economic security to which they can appeal. Recently there have again been calls for associative status with Russia in order to institutionalize the link.

This only fuels Georgia's fears that Abkhazia is drifting further from its sphere of influence and suspicions that the Abkhaz are necessary to Russia as a means of leverage on Georgia. Saakashvili has shown himself willing to try to engage in a more constructive relationship with Russia, which will in the long run be important for Georgia. Yet Russia is unlikely to relinquish its influence over Abkhazia in the near future. Russia will hardly recognize Abkhazia's independence (nor would any other internationally recognized state unless Georgia took the lead). Neither, however, is Russia likely to strike a deal with Georgia that would lead to a renewal of bloodshed and instability in Abkhazia.

Meanwhile, most people on both sides of the conflict are weary of the ongoing instability, economic hardship, and restricted opportunities of the last decade. The status quo plays into the hands of the various criminal groups that have a vested interest in its preservation. And there is a sense among many Abkhaz that their aspirations are met better by the current situation than by any alternatives they could envisage. But time is on the side of neither Georgia nor Abkhazia. If widespread emigration, infrastructural demise, and social disintegration continue neither will be able to shape the sort of communities and societies they ultimately want to create.

Whither the peace process?

Saakashvili has been preoccupied since coming to power with pursuing a number of key issues put on the agenda by the election, state finances and the struggle against corruption among them. He has made relatively little explicit reference to the conflict with Abkhazia, and it certainly has not been high on the agenda thus far. Saakashvili would be wise to keep it that way until the autumn. The issue of Abkhazia's relationship with Georgia is extremely sensitive, and few Abkhaz politicians will be willing to engage with it in the run-up to the presidential election.

Thus far, what little has been said in public is not indicative of a change in attitude in Tbilisi. For years the Georgian approach has been one of isolating Abkhazia, using trade restrictions and economic pressure and threatening rhetoric and occasionally behaviour to attempt to force the Abkhaz into compliance. The situation in Ajara is hardly comparable with that in Abkhazia, but examples of heavy-handed and coercive

behaviour and Saakashvili's emphasis on Georgia's national unity and the restoration of its territorial integrity deliver an implicit message. At times this has been made more explicit. For instance, at a ceremony to posthumously honour Zhiuli Shartava, the Georgian civilian head of the government in Sukhum/i at the end of the war, Saakashvili spoke of the likelihood of blood being spilt to re-establish Georgia's territorial integrity. A politician fond of symbolism, elements of Saakashvili's behaviour can certainly be read as provocative. Thus at a recent meeting in western Georgia with Georgian refugees from Abkhazia he handed one of them his wristwatch and proclaimed that by the time the watch battery ran down in two years they would be back home.

So the Abkhaz see little in Georgian behaviour that would encourage closer relations. If anything, Abkhaz mistrust of the Georgian leadership is greater now than it was under Shevardnadze. Georgia is seen to have significant US backing in the form of $64 million in grants and the ongoing Train and Equip program that provides military hardware and training. While this is not intended for use against Abkhazia, Abkhaz fears of renewed aggression or precipitous action are tangible.

However, it is too early to discount the possibility that the Georgian government may find a way to break out of the vicious circle. Some challenging commentators on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict have been elected into the new Georgian parliament, and some figures in the new administration have a more open view on Abkhazia than was the case under Shevardnadze. The replacement of Tamaz Nadareishvili as leader of the government in exile of the Georgian refugees from Abkhazia and debate about refugee representation in the Georgian parliament are also perhaps signs of positive change. From now on, all of Tbilisi's efforts in regard to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict will be coordinated in one ministry under Giorgi Khaindrava, State Minister for Conflict Resolution, and the indications are that the new government is working on its strategy. There are also perhaps some grounds for hope in Saakashvili's inconsistency. Very recently, in the midst of speculation over violence in Ajara, Saakashvili reiterated hopes for a peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

The first real test of the new government's approach to Abkhazia will be in response to the election. It remains to be seen whether Saakashvili will capitalize on the high degree of public support he enjoys to engage his fellow citizens in discussion of possible concessions and encourage them to re-think Georgia's approach to the conflict. With Abkhazia's presidential race still wide open, it is hard to

predict what Abkhazian policy will be this autumn. Certainly in the near future it is unlikely there will be any fundamental shift in Abkhazia's position with regard to Georgia, nor will Abkhaz aspirations change. Yet if the leadership in Sukhum/i were to see evidence of consistent, trustworthy, and reliable behaviour on the part of the Georgian authorities and a preparedness to exclude the use of force, that could be highly challenging to them. It would place the ball firmly back in Abkhazia's court.

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