

Beacon of Democracy or Khachapuri Republic?

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So how did we get from the days of wine, roses and khachapuri in late 2003 and early 2004 to where we are today in Georgia?

Immediately after the crackdown on November 7, 2007, the Western media, in addition to the inevitable puns about roses, thorns and withering, offered two different narratives. The first, perhaps best seen in Anne Applebaum's piece in *The Washington Post*, was that democracy had failed in Georgia partially because of wrongheaded U.S. policies. The second was that this was a mistake, but otherwise things were going well in Georgia and if the January 5 elections went well, democracy in Georgia would be back on track. Interestingly, this latter narrative seems to be in the ascendancy and seems to reflect US policy. The truth lies somewhere in between and is worth thinking about.

First, I think that the post-Rose Revolution Government of Georgia has accomplished a lot, which some of our speakers have recognized. They have fought corruption in government and business. Foreign assistance has actually been used to rebuild Georgia, and stopped ending up in individual bank accounts. Laws have been passed to streamline business procedures with the hopes of luring more foreign investment. In mid-2004, Aslan Abashidze, the criminal leader of Ajara, fled to Russia under pressure from the newly revitalized government. Cities, notably Tbilisi and Batumi, have begun to look noticeably cleaner, busier and more modern as the economy has slowly improved. These are real accomplishments for which the Georgian government deserves credit. And they've done it in the shadow of, shall we say, a very difficult neighbor.

The Georgian government has argued that they have prioritized state building-not democracy-during these years. I think this is an argument made of convenience that creates a false dichotomy between these two ideas. A government as popular and competent as Saakashvili's in its first few years would only have been made stronger by doing things more democratically with a little more attention paid to process.

Second, I think a great deal of Georgia's strategic import is tied in to its democratic development. A failure of democracy in Georgia is a failure for a U.S. and European policy that goes far beyond Georgia. If democracy fails in Georgia, it will be hard to make the argument that democracy can succeed in any non-democratic country. On the other hand, success for democracy in Georgia breathes life into U.S. democracy assistance policies and convinces people that the spread of democracy has not come to an end.

I believe there is still hope for democracy in Georgia. Four years of better elections, less corruption and a public commitment to democracy by the government are buttressed by widespread agreement in Georgia that the future lies with the West-and that means

democracy. While these are far from guarantees of success, they do help and should not be overlooked.

But the development of democracy in Georgia has been decidedly mixed since the early days of the Rose Revolution. Constitutional amendments were pushed through in 2004, concentrating power in the president's hands more than ever before, giving the president the right to dissolve parliament and weakening the powers of the legislative branch.

The judiciary never achieved full independence either, as the government continued to dominate it. Additionally, the spirit of democracy was conspicuously absent from the new Georgia. Media was less free. The parliament, once a place of lively debate, became dominated by the president's party and far less independent. Leaders of the political opposition were frequently accused of being parties to Russian plots to destabilize Georgia and ridiculed by the president and government for their weakness.

In 2006, the government manipulated the electoral system for local elections, ensuring that the ruling party would dominate local legislatures. Later that year, the government again changed the constitution so that the president and parliament would be elected on the same day. This was broadly seen as an effort to ensure that the still-popular President Saakashvili could provide coattails to the unpopular parliamentary leadership of his party.

However, the actions of the Georgian government described above only tell a limited part of the story. It is also important to look at the actions of Georgia's biggest and most important ally, the United States.

Since the Rose Revolution, the failure of the U.S. government to challenge the erosion of Georgian democracy has become increasingly conspicuous and troubling. Additionally, democracy assistance in Georgia has changed. Civil society organizations, which might have provided a balance to the powerful government, received less money. Instead, support went to strengthening the Georgian state—an important goal, but not one that helped democracy in Georgia. Georgia is a country that is very pro-American; politicians and ordinary people care a lot about what the United States does and says. The U.S. policy of praising Georgian accomplishments in other areas but not criticizing the increasingly clear shortcomings in the democracy area led the Georgian government to believe that they could move further away from democracy without consequences.

So they did.

In short, the United States acted as an enabler as Georgian democracy slipped further and further away.

Where then do we go from here, and how can we help Georgian democracy get back on track?

For the future of Georgian democracy, January 6 is more important than January 5. There are three possible outcomes to the election, in reverse order of likelihood: an outright win

by one of the opposition candidates, a runoff or a first round win by Saakashvili. If it is one of the first two, that changes a few things. If Saakashvili does win this election, which seems pretty likely, there will be two directions open to him. The first is to tell his people and the world that he has now survived a test of popularity, renewed his mandate and does not need to brook any opposition or criticism. The second will be to see the previous months as a humbling experience and redouble his efforts to move Georgia towards a strong and meaningful democracy. I fear that the first is the more likely direction, but the role of the United States should be to push Saakashvili towards the second direction and to help him move forward accordingly.

There are five specific ways that the United States can do this:

Support institutions, not individuals: Saakashvili's outsized personality has made it very hard to separate Georgia's democratic aspirations from those of its leader. His intellect, humor, passion, courage and language skills were particularly appealing in the United States, where they were reinforced by a familiarity with American culture and contributed to a strong personal bond between the presidents of the two countries. This bond was solidified during Bush's 2005 visit to Georgia, where the two presidents feasted on Georgian food late into the night and Bush briefly went on stage to join the dancers who had come to entertain the party. Democracy rarely evolves simply because a democrat gets elected, yet U.S. policy in Georgia seemed to reflect this approach. American assistance in Georgia should instead refocus on supporting the democratic development of institutions inside and outside the state, including government departments, local and national legislatures, civil society and political parties.

Reinvigorate civil society: Since the Rose Revolution, civil society has been considerably weaker than under the previous regime. This is partially because a number of civil society leaders have moved into the government or parliament, and partially because there are more jobs in the private sector than before, but it is also substantially due to the United States reorienting its democracy assistance support in Georgia. By reducing support to civil society organizations, Washington has contributed to the withering of a key component of democracy. Stronger civil society organizations could have helped to provide a check on the government, something parliament is not constitutionally able to do and which the increasingly less independent and critical media has been unable to do since the Rose Revolution. Because of the weakened civil society, each time democracy was cut a little bit, there was little cohesive and visible response. If the U.S. government does nothing else in Georgia, they should substantially increase support for civil society there.

Distinguish between reform and democratizing: Georgia's government has succeeded in passing a broad array of reform legislation. They have reduced bureaucratic hurdles for those seeking to open a business, improved Georgia's business climate, made rational and necessary budget decisions, invested in the country's infrastructure and generally improved the quality of governance. This is not, however, the same as strengthening democracy. Moreover, the way in which many of these reforms have occurred-with limited dialogue, parliamentary debate and public input-has contributed to growing

resentment of the government among Georgians. Strengthening democracy means increasing participation and accountability in all phases of governance and allowing for free elections at the legislative and policymaking levels. It does not simply mean passing reform legislation that is westward looking and improving the business climate. The United States should continue to support and applaud the reforms which the Georgian government has undertaken, but this must be evaluated separately from the question of the direction and development of Georgia's democracy.

Don't overpromise: This is a basic rule of politics at all levels, but one which both the Georgian and Americans broke with regards to democracy in Georgia. Saakashvili's weakness for overblown rhetoric has caused him to overstate his accomplishments and consistently make unrealistic promises. Saakashvili has delivered the best democracy in the region, but has promised his people Plato's Republic on the Black Sea. The gap between the expectations to which this rhetoric contributed and the reality of life in Saakashvili's Georgia for ordinary people was a major factor contributing to the size and vehemence of the demonstrations in early November. Similarly, the rhetoric and actions of the United States overstated the degree of the democratic changes in Georgia.

Don't get spun: The United States should be more rigorous in evaluating the development of Georgia's democracy. Verbal commitments to democracy by the government, no matter how eloquent and how good the English, should not obscure problems with Georgian democracy. Unfortunately, this has been the case in recent years. The Georgian government is exceptionally good at presenting itself both at the individual level and through the media. As a result, things like a well articulated speech in the United States by Saakashvili or a western media campaign have taken on far more significance than they should. In the future, Washington should base its democracy policy in Georgia on the actual state of democracy there, not just the words of its leadership. For example, Saakashvili's recent comments that "I do not want to be the president of a country that limits mass media and that declares emergency rule" or that "I would like everyone to know that each baton hit on our citizens was also a hit on me and the tear-gas that the police used made me cry as well" should not be taken as evidence of Saakashvili's contrition.

Lastly, the big winner in recent weeks in Georgia has been Vladimir Putin. The visible shortcomings of democracy and chaos in Georgia are exactly what the Russians would like to see there. There is little doubt that many in Russia would like to see Saakashvili fail. This does not, however, mean that domestic opponents of Saakashvili are somehow Russian operatives. Some may be, but clearly most are not. The evidence used by the Georgian government has been, in many cases, quite flimsy. The reality of the Russian threat should not be used to excuse democratic shortcomings. Success of genuine democracy in Georgia is the most powerful message Saakashvili and Georgia can send to their northern neighbor and we need to help them do that.

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