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What Was the Rose Revolution For?

Understanding the Georgian Revolution

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Interpreting November 2007

The events of November 2007 in Georgia were seen by many as evidence of the failure of the Rose Revolution. Images of security forces using fire hoses, tear gas, and other violent means to disperse relatively peaceful demonstrations, followed by arrests and the temporary suspension of free speech and assembly were clearly incompatible with the image Georgia still enjoyed at that time of being – in what now seem like ill-chosen words by President Bush – as a "beacon of democracy" in the region. Not surprisingly, these events substantially damaged that image.

If one judges these events through the prism of European and American expectations, it is clear that they demonstrated the shortcomings of the Rose Revolution's democratic promise, but viewed through the prism of the Georgian government, one arrives at a very different conclusion. For the government, the November crackdown was a demonstration of the strength of the new Georgian state. Smaller demonstrations than last November's had, after all, helped bring down the previous regime. For that reason, President Saakashvili afterwards declared the demonstrations a "major test in (Georgian) statehood," but a test which the country had far from failed: "We have passed the test on whether we are Bantustan or a real state, whether we are a failed state, or whether we have a real government." Although the words struck foreign ears as somewhat bizarre at the time, for a Georgian state which had made bolstering state structures its top goal – far ahead of building democracy – Saakashvili's words made perfect sense. Still, the events of recent months have made it but impossible for even the most ardent supporters of the Rose Revolution not to recognize the disparity between the rhetoric and reality of democracy in post-revolution Georgia.

In the months since November, a number of western think tanks and NGOs, most notably the International Crisis Group, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch, have issued reports and statements offering severe criticisms of the actions of the Georgian government. Similarly, other observers and scholars, such as Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Daria Vaisman, and Christopher Walker, have offered critical analyses of their own. Most of these writings have sought to place the November crackdown in the context of the problems of democracy in Georgia over the last four years, problems often willfully overlooked by the U.S. government. Criticism of democratic development in Georgia is nothing new. Before the crackdown there had also been critiques from authors such as Ana Dolidze, Charles Kupchan, and others, including myself.

Although I have been among these critics, and believe that these works play a valuable role in both understanding Georgia and U.S. and European policy towards Georgia, in this article I seek to explore a related question which may help put these events and subsequent works in a broader context. That question is – *what were the goals and aims of the Rose Revolution?* Answering that question can help us evaluate the Rose Revolution on its own terms. This should not preclude looking at questions of democracy and human rights, but will allow us to more effectively probe some of the government's claims, including those regarding state building and economic reform being the top priorities, and thus perhaps offer a more nuanced analysis of the Rose Revolution.

A Revolution without Ideology

The term Rose Revolution has always been stronger on imagery and alliteration than on descriptive or analytical power. In practice, it might be more accurately called a democratic breakthrough or the final stage in Georgia's transition away from the Soviet system, rather than as a revolution in the traditional sense. It was not, for many reasons, a revolution comparable to, for example, the Russian, Chinese, French, or Iranian revolutions. The change was not all that dramatic as many of the leaders of Georgia's new government, including the president and prime minister, were only a few years removed from high ranking positions in the previous government or ruling party of Eduard Shevardnadze.

Another critical reason why the Rose Revolution differed from the aforementioned revolutions was that there was no real ideology driving it. The demands of the protesters on the streets of Tbilisi in November 2003 were concise and direct; they wanted to see an end to the corrupt and failing regime of Eduard Shevardnadze. Thus the primary demand was to call for Shevardnadze's resignation – not for some sweeping change in the country's governing political philosophy. The leaders of the Rose Revolution, who became the leaders of Georgia after 2004, had never been ideologues of any kind. They did not, for example, write books or statements describing their vision or ideology. Their stated commitments to democracy, prosperity, and a stronger Georgia, while sincere, were closer to platitudes than ideology, and were broadly shared throughout the country.

The absence of a strong ideology did not preclude a vision and set of goals; although those goals were admittedly somewhat vague. The most basic promise of Georgia's opposition was change; specifically, change from the failed policies and governance of the Shevardnadze years. The opposition also spoke about restoring the territorial integrity of Georgia, meaning bringing Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into Georgia and orienting Georgia towards the West and Western alliances such as NATO and the EU. Furthermore, the opposition promised to fight corruption, reinvigorate the economy, and strengthen the country's faltering democracy.

While this represented something of a vision, two things about these goals are worth noting. First, they were, to a large extent, a laundry list which were often presented without emphasizing priorities or describing means to achieve them. Second, the underlying vision of these goals was not substantially different from anything the weak

Shevardnadze government claimed it wanted to do. The opposition's – or at least the opposition which orchestrated the Rose Revolution – platform was essentially that they would be more honest and efficient than the Shevardnadze government in pursuing these goals. In this sense, for Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania, and the other architects of the revolution, the 2003 parliamentary elections and to some extent the Rose Revolution itself were, as Michael Dukakis might have phrased it, ultimately about competence, not ideology.

Once Shevardnadze resigned and the revolution's primary leader Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president in a landslide victory in January 2004, the new Georgian government was faced with the task of charting a new direction for their country. And it was only in this period that the vision and goals of the Rose Revolution, as well as the order of priority for those goals, were ultimately formed.

Outside Expectations of the Rose Revolution

The answer to the question of what the goals of the Rose Revolution were differs depending on from whose angle we look at it. The Georgian people, the new Georgian government, the United States, Europe, and Russia all viewed the Rose Revolution differently. The Russians viewed the Rose Revolution as a negative development from its earliest days. In their view, the revolution replaced a familiar and weak, but not exactly beloved, leader and government with a new aggressive and strongly pro-Western government. Additionally, the Russians also felt that the revolution moved Georgia further from their orbit and strengthened Western influence in a region considered by Russia as its own back yard or, in Russia's terms, near abroad. Not surprisingly from the earliest days of the Rose Revolution, Russia set out to undermine and damage the new Georgian government.

The United States' opinion of the Rose Revolution was the mirror opposite of Russia's. For the West generally, and the United States specifically, the Rose Revolution was viewed as an ideological and political victory. It was immediately hailed as a success story for the promotion of democracy and U.S. foreign policy. A great deal of hope was placed in the new Georgian government's ability to deliver democracy, reform, and economic growth. Accordingly, Europe and the United States sought to support the new Georgian government beginning in the days immediately following the resignation of President Shevardnadze.

The general goals and expectations of the region's major foreign powers towards the Rose Revolution are relatively easy to determine. However, the question of what the Rose Revolution meant to Georgia and Georgians is a bit more complex. First, it should be mentioned that the Rose Revolution was not a particularly divisive event in Georgia, as it was supported very broadly throughout Georgian society. There were few opponents of the revolution who were not directly tied to the corrupt regimes of Shevardnadze and, in the Ajara region, local strongman Aslan Abashidze. In the last months of the Shevardnadze regime, the general attitude of Georgian society was best summed up by the one word slogan taken as name of a radical youth group: "kmara," or "enough."

Indeed, by the end of the Shevardnadze years, the Georgian people had had enough – enough of corruption, poverty, loss of territory, and of the state's failure to deliver basic services.

While this desire for change was strong, it was not well defined. To some, this change meant orientation towards the West and free markets. To others, it meant returning to the times of a strong state that provided for them. For many it meant strengthening the Georgian state so that the country could defend itself and ensure a secure and independent future.

The task of turning these broad visions into a set of concrete goals fell to the new government and its leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, who on January 4, 2004 – only six weeks after Shevardnadze's resignation – was elected president of Georgia with 96 percent of the vote in an election which was broadly understood as free and fair. It was an extraordinary mandate by almost any measure. However, the question of what the new president's new mandate exactly was for, was far from clear.

The Government's Vision

As president, Saakashvili's early emphasis on restoring territorial integrity and strengthening the Georgian state, rather than on continuing democratic reforms or immediate economic assistance, surprised outsiders. However, this approach reflected both political sophistication and a keen understanding of the Georgian people on the part of the new president. The issue of territorial integrity in particular remained extremely important to most Georgians throughout the Shevardnadze years. Saakashvili earned an early and unexpected victory in this area midway through his first year in office when he succeeded in ousting Ajara criminal strongman Alsan Abashidze and returned the breakaway Ajara region to Georgian sovereignty. Victory in the two other breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was and remains much more difficult as there is still no clear foreseeable end to these stalemated conflicts. Regardless, Saakashvili seems to understand that returning those regions to Georgia would be an extraordinary achievement, and that he will be able to strengthen the support from the Georgian electorate by simply being viewed as aggressively seeking their return.

Similarly, Saakashvili's hard line regarding Russia does not only reflect his views on the issue itself, but also stems from the fact that a strong anti-Russian position is good politics in Georgia. In times of political hardship, Saakashvili has frequently used rhetoric regarding South Ossetia and Abkhazia to rally political support for his government among the Georgian electorate, even though such rhetoric is considered inflammatory by Russia. Thus, Saakashvili's strong rhetoric has involved a tradeoff where he has gained political support domestically at the expense of weakening relations between the two countries. It should be noted that Russia's behavior towards Georgia, including its boycott of Georgian wines and mineral waters and alleged interventions in domestic Georgian politics, is primarily driven by Russia's broader discomfort with the possibility of a strong, pro-West, and truly independent Georgia on its southern border. However, Saakashvili has made it more difficult for either side to deescalate the conflict.

In addition to these external factors, the new government's focus on state building stemmed from the fact that, under Shevardnadze, Georgia was bordering on being a failed state. Under the old regime, services were not delivered, schools were barely taught, the police force acted more as an organized crime ring than as a service and protection to the people, crime was widespread, infrastructure had deteriorated and corruption had permeated virtually every aspect of government. Solving at least some of these problems was thus an essential prerequisite to rebuilding the Georgian economy and infrastructure, restoring the country's territorial integrity, and even building democracy. The government began attacking these problems with extraordinary energy and vigor as soon as it came into power in January of 2004. This work quickly paid off as government corruption was substantially reduced; infrastructure was repaired and improved to make life easier for many Georgians; the energy situations were improved so that many Georgians were able to get reliable electricity, water and heat for the first time in years; and slowly the liberal reforms with regards to taxes, investments and finance began to bear fruit as more foreign investment came into the country.

But the outcomes were not all positive. In addition to the striking absence of any kind of continued democratic reform or consolidation from the government's initial set of goals and accomplishment, the government pursued its ambitious reform agenda with little concern for democratic processes including contestation, deliberation, and citizen input. Strengthening of the State took a clear priority over strengthening of democracy, and this was pursued without any effort to hide the concurrent deemphasizing of democratic reform.

The supposed incompatibility of the dual pursuits of a stronger state and stronger democracy is, for the most part, a creation of the Georgian government. The notion that these two ideas are somehow in conflict with each other in Georgia, and that these goals cannot be pursued simultaneously is very convenient for the government, but there is little reason to believe it is actually true. In fact, in Georgia these two goals would have been mutually reinforcing. By seeking to strengthen the state without paying sufficient attention to the need to continue democratic reforms, the government failed to ensure that the public at large understood and had a chance to weigh in on the goals it was attempting to pursue. By rapidly pushing through ultra-liberal reforms without any real discussions or debates within the legislature or between the government and the people, it made it difficult for many Georgians to understand the importance of the reforms or their potential impact. This problem was further exacerbated by the government's tendency to raise expectations and oversell its accomplishments.

Additionally, when discontent increased in Georgian society, the democratic avenues for expressing such discontent were not sufficiently developed. The legislature was weakened early in Saakashvili's term through constitutional reforms which made it difficult for legislators to act as a check on executive power. Similarly, press freedoms and independent civil society organizations were not as strong as they once were. As a result, after the revolution, they were significantly less able to channel citizens' concerns or to hold the government accountable for its policies.

Thus, public discontent built and went unaddressed until it spilled into the streets with new demonstrations featuring radical, if unrealistic demands. The government was thus faced with a significant problem in November 2007; a problem it decided to address by using violence to disperse the demonstrations, even though they were already dwindling on their own accord. What was more disturbing was, however, the fact that the government somehow thought this approach was a wise and justified decision.

Conclusions

Despite the demonstrations in November and the events which followed, for the Georgian government, the Rose Revolution has been a success. After all, the state is stronger than it had been at any time in decades, and probably centuries. However, the government has had less success resolving the issues of territorial integrity which still dog the country. Additionally, indications of a stronger and more independent Georgia have only made relations with Russia more tense. Russia's desire for a weak and malleable southern neighbor, meanwhile, continues to create problems for Georgia. The fault here, however, probably lies more with Russia, which has maintained a policy of harassment, economic boycotts, and intervention with Georgia, more so than with any actions taken by Georgia.

Democracy in Georgia, however, is in crisis. In the long run, we may see a turnaround in this area, but at this time Georgia seems to be moving towards consolidating a strong, but not particularly democratic, regime. To deem the Rose Revolution a failure because of this, however, misses the larger point. The real failure here is one of Western expectations rather than the policies of the Georgia government. Until recently, it remained possible for Western governments to overlook the democratic shortcomings and to view the Rose Revolution as successful, according to both Western and Georgian criteria. That illusion was shattered with the first rounds of rubber bullets and tear gas canisters used by the government on November 7, 2007, and cannot yet be fully restored even after the relatively smooth election of January 5, during which Saakashvili was reelected. Now Western countries and organizations find themselves increasingly unable to ignore the differences between their goals and expectations of the Rose Revolution and those of the Georgian government. Recognizing this difference is the first step towards crafting policies regarding Georgia that is grounded in appropriate expectations and a clear understanding of political realities in Georgia.

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