

WHAT HAS WASHINGTON DONE?: ADVERSE EFFECTS OF STATE-BUILDING ON DEMOCRACY IN GEORGIA

Alexander Schellinger

In September 2008, shortly after the war between Russia and Georgia, Freedom House—an organization funded largely by the U.S. government—wrote in a letter to “relevant committees” in Congress:

Georgia’s democracy deficit was an important but underappreciated factor in the recent crisis over South Ossetia. Because of the lack of independent television, inadequate institutional checks and balances, weak political opposition and a marginalized civil society, President Saakashvili was free to make his decisions during the crisis without the need to consider other views. One wonders if the decision-making process would have been enhanced if stronger democratic institutional mechanisms had been in place. (Freedom House)

The Freedom House letter suggests that there is a strong correlation between democratic deficits in Georgia and President Saakashvili’s ability to go to war with Russia. The letter’s implication is obvious: had more robust democratic institutions been in place, the war between Russia and Georgia might not have occurred. In this paper, I argue that U.S. government assistance to Georgia since 2003 has failed to support robust democratization, focusing too much on strengthening the executive branch of the Georgian government. Once Saakashvili took office, Washington reduced funding to critical democratization programs, especially those that supported independent media and civil society organizations. This shift in U.S. assistance, which contributed to the slowdown of democratic

Alexander Schellinger is a senior at Columbia University majoring in Political Science and Economics. He will pursue a Master’s in Politics and Government in the EU at the London School of Economics in the fall. He interned with the German Technical Cooperation in Georgia in 2008.

consolidation in Georgia, demonstrates that U.S. aid is critical to Georgia's political development.

Due to its strategic location and nascent statehood, "democracy in Georgia is a matter of international interest" (Nodia and Scholtbach 1). There are many factors influencing democratization in Georgia; "international interest," or assistance, is just one of them. Yet the role of the United States is preeminently important for democratic developments in Georgia. Relations between Georgia and the United States are buttressed by close personal ties between former President Bush—who in 2005 became the first U.S. president to visit Georgia—and Saakashvili, who named a Georgian highway after Bush. American assistance to Georgia is critical for the development of democracy; unfortunately, however, it has set the wrong incentives for the Georgian government.

An assessment of U.S. assistance to Georgia after the 2008 war with Russia is sobering. If one assumes that Washington pursued an idealist agenda *vis-à-vis* Georgia, then the war left no doubt about the failure of this agenda. The war demonstrated, in fact, that President Saakashvili has almost unchecked authority and that the current state of democracy in Georgia is dire. Some argue that Washington's pronouncements about Georgian democracy were insincere, and that what Washington really sought was a reliable strategic partner in a critical region. Even such a realist assessment, however, does not fully explain the events of August 2008. Today, Georgia faces domestic instability and international insecurity—Washington's assistance, it seems, has furthered neither moral nor pragmatic goals. As one important step to support either an idealist or a realist agenda, the new U.S. administration should stop funding initiatives that contribute to a hyper-presidential government and redirect assistance to independent media and civic organizations.¹

¹ Many development organizations from European countries, such as the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the British Department for International Development (DFID) have also concentrated their resources on state-building, and economic, and legal reforms rather than on civil society projects. This essay centers on the role of the U.S., but research on European development organizations and democracy in Georgia should be done.

U.S. INTERESTS

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has actively pursued strategic interests in Georgia. In the second half of the 1990s, the United States under Bill Clinton became increasingly involved in energy projects in the South Caucasus through the creation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, and Baku-Tbilisi-Supsa pipelines, each of which involved billion dollar investments from American and British oil companies (Penev 35). These pipelines were of vital importance to Washington, which sought to develop the energy corridor from the Caspian region via Georgia in order to bypass Russian and Iranian territories.

In its annual reports, the State Department mentions “U.S. Strategic Interests” in Georgia. Of these interests, a number have been of vital importance since 2003. According to the U.S. government, Georgia is an outpost on the “frontier of freedom,” an ally in the global war on terrorism, a supporter of the Iraq war, and a partner in an energy-rich region (“U.S. Government Assistance”).

The U.S. government has been referring to Georgia as a part of the frontier of freedom since the 2003 Rose Revolution, the first of the so-called “color revolutions” (Bush). In November 2003, thousands of Georgians took to the streets to protest official election results, and the largely non-violent protests led to the dismissal of President Eduard Shevardnadze and the subsequent inauguration of Mikheil Saakashvili, the pro-Western opposition leader.

In the years since the Rose Revolution, Georgia has moved to the forefront of the U.S. agenda because of supposed “concerns about threats posed by terrorist groups in the area”—and because of its outspoken criticism of Russia. Georgia has also become an important ally of the United States in the war in Iraq, contributing some 2,000 soldiers before Tbilisi was forced to withdraw its troops in light of its war with Russia (Baev; Collin).

In May 2005, President Bush visited Georgia and addressed thousands of enthusiastic Georgians on Liberty Square in Tbilisi: “You are building a democratic society where the rights of minorities are respected, where a free press flourishes, a vigorous opposi-

tion is welcome, and unity is achieved through peace” (Bush). With increasing frequency, the Bush Administration relied on Georgia as an example of a major success in its democracy-promoting strategy (Gvosdev).

THE DUAL GOALS OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD GEORGIA

According to Henry Kissinger, American foreign policy has been most successful when it balanced “morality and pragmatism,” and—conversely—serious errors have occurred whenever the United States “lost the sense of balance between our interests and our ideals” (Kissinger 190). While idealist-oriented policymakers generally see democratization as an end goal, realist strategists tend to use it as a means to advance other interests. It was the overlap of these two approaches that made U.S. democracy promotion in Georgia partially successful—until the transfer of power to Mr. Saakashvili.

Both idealists and realists had an interest in fostering political competition under the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze. The democratization of Georgia, the end goal of the idealist faction, was the priority of realists as well, since it was assumed that a regime change in Tbilisi would allow the United States to advance its interests in the South Caucasus. However, in the aftermath of the war between Russia and Georgia, it has become clear that neither the idealists nor the realists have achieved their goals in Georgia.

Since 2003, America has limited its support for independent media outlets, civic organizations, and opposition parties. Instead, the U.S. has given priority to state-building, with the intention of strengthening the institutional capacity of the Georgian government. It is possible, of course, that Washington based its decision to shift its resources on its experiences with democracy promotion in the 1990s. Thomas Carothers notes that the halt in the global democratization process in the 1990s was partly due to the United States’ insufficient focus on state-building. In many cases, states were too weak to achieve democratic consolidation, and their transitional stages became permanent “grey zones” of illiberal, partial, or

weak democracies. The lack of focus on state-building on the part of “democracy aid practitioners” was an important reason for the failure of democratization in the 1990s:

... [D]emocracy aid practitioners did not give significant attention to the challenge of a society trying to democratize while it is grappling with the reality of building a state from scratch or coping with an existent but largely nonfunctional state. (Carothers 2002 8-9)

The second Bush Administration’s focus on supporting Georgia’s executive branch, which effectively translated into enhancing Saakashvili’s powers, harmed the realist—and perverted the liberal—agenda. Washington might have sought a genuine Georgian democracy, but its uncritical and unlimited support for Saakashvili has had adverse effects. Worse yet, it has created a quasi-authoritarian regime.

In August 2008, Georgia engaged in a war with Russia over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Throughout the 1990s, South Ossetia and Abkhazia found themselves in a perpetual state of conflict with Georgia. Though these conflicts remained frozen during the early 2000s, they turned hot in the summer of 2008. Russia, defending the autonomy of regions that had been attacked by Saakashvili’s forces, decisively defeated Georgia. The war with Russia harmed Georgia’s territorial integrity, economy, and international reputation. Now, the prospects of reintegration are even more unlikely and the government of Saakashvili faces stiff political opposition. The potential of Georgia to serve as a strategic partner against Russia has been weakened.

Herein lies the paradox of U.S. government assistance to Georgia: Washington’s help was intended to strengthen democracy in Georgia while enhancing the country’s national security. In reality, U.S. assistance has weakened the democratization process, creating a dangerous situation whereby Saakashvili can unilaterally engage in a war with an adversary as powerful as Russia.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR

In the years before the Rose Revolution, the U.S. government supported free media in Georgia through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and various State Department programs. Foreign media assistance can have ambiguous effects on democratization, but there is evidence that U.S. media support in Georgia actually strengthened independent media organizations and improved professional journalism (Carothers 1999; “U.S. Government Assistance”). U.S. support of television channel Rustavi 2, for instance, allowed the channel to become an important platform for the opposition during the Rose Revolution.

In the annual report to Congress in 2000, the U.S. government noted its support of 31 commercial and 19 regional television stations, as well as exchange and training programs for Georgian journalists at media outlets such as *The Washington Post* (“U.S. Government Assessment” 45). In 2001, the U.S. supported the training of more than 400 print journalists through the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), and assisted 31 television stations and more than ten independent radio stations (“U.S. Government Assistance” 54-55).

When Saakashvili was elected, the focus of U.S. assistance changed drastically. USAID and the Department of State dramatically reduced funding for independent media programs.² USAID assisted no “media civil society organizations” in 2006—and just five in 2007. Moreover, in November 2007, USAID announced plans to assist another five organizations in 2008 (“USAID Performance Report”). These numbers were released by the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi just days after the Saakashvili regime brutally suppressed demonstrators in Tbilisi and raided Imedi TV and Kavkasia, the only independent television stations left in Georgia at the time.³

2 The U.S. government continued to support the provision of internet access, but the internet plays a marginal role in Georgia’s political landscape.

3 In September 2007, the arrest of Irakli Okruashvili, an opposition politician, led to a series of demonstrations reaching a climax in November, when 50,000-75,000 people demonstrated for new elections. In response, the Georgian government dispersed the rallies with violence and declared a “state of emergency.” Independent television stations

In its 2008 *Nations in Transit* report, Freedom House supported its decision to downgrade its rating of independent media freedom in Georgia:

[...] Georgian media demonstrate weak editorial independence and low professional standards and are often used to promote the political interests of their owners. [...] Temporary suspension of Imedi, the major opposition-oriented TV and radio, questioned the government's commitment to media freedom and exposed the fragility of media pluralism. (233-234)

Despite the "fragility of media" in Georgia, Washington has not begun any initiative to support independent media outlets. In USAID's 2007 annual report, published after the November demonstrations, the U.S. government justified its position:

Given the need to address the critical upcoming election needs [as a result of the events of November, Saakashvili agreed to early presidential elections], funds were not budgeted for a new start in media. Therefore the media sector assessment was postponed. (19)

The U.S. government's assessment appears to be somewhat cynical. Georgian society, after all, can benefit from the presence of independent and professional media before elections, and "relatively small amounts of money can make a fundamental difference to newspapers or radio stations under siege" (Carothers 239). Nevertheless, the U.S. government remained firm in its redirection of assistance from the media sector to the Georgian executive branch.⁴

The once thriving civil society sector has also been weakened

were raided, their equipment smashed while staff was intimidated at gunpoint. Another important television station, Rustavi Two, has become notably less critical of the government since 2006.

4 In the presidential elections of January 2008, opposition candidates received about 25% of the vote, despite highly restricted media access. Moreover, the ruling party by outspent the opposition candidates by a factor of 30 (Lansky and Areshidze 164).

by the shift in U.S. aid. Civic organizations in Georgia—which were instrumental to the success of the Rose Revolution—have been in decline. According to a 2007 Freedom House Report:

Many civil society leaders joined President Saakashvili in government and the organizations they left were unable to rebuild as the U.S. government redirected its democracy assistance funding away from supporting civil society to helping the Georgian government implement its reform plans. (“Aid to Georgia”)

Ironically, the author of Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit*, Ghia Nodia, joined the Georgian government in early 2008, a few months after the publication of the above letter. In *The Political Landscape of Georgia*, published in 2006, Nodia reaches a similar conclusion about the civil sector in Georgia: “Civil society institutions experienced a relatively high level of development before the Rose Revolution [...]. However, once Georgia got a popular and active government, civil society started to look less robust than it did before” (30).

Like Nodia, many have left the civil society sector and joined the ranks of Saakashvili’s regime. David Darchiashvili, former executive director of the Open Society Institute, is now chairing a parliamentary committee for the Saakashvili government. It is a well-known tactic of authoritarian regimes to mute critical voices by incorporating them into their power structures (Tilly 170). The United States has been aware of the decline of the civil society sector, yet it has continued to redirect assistance to state-building efforts. The United States’ overall assistance to Georgia has been fairly constant since 2003,⁵ but sector assistance has changed significantly.

⁵ In 2005, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation signed a \$295.3 million compact with Georgia. MCC cooperation is dependent among other factors on a country’s democratization progress.

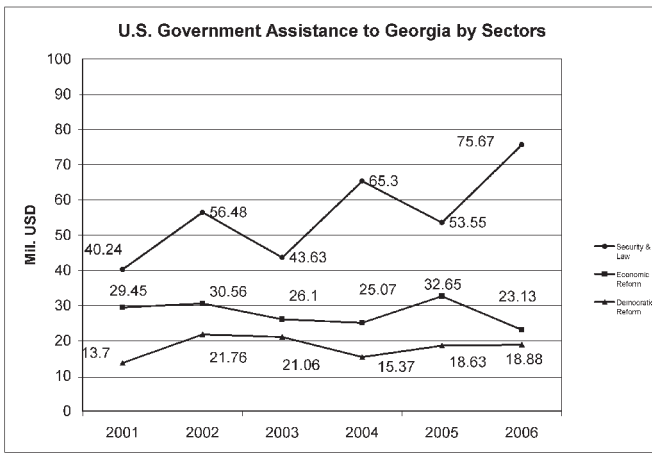


Figure1: Three of the largest sectors of U.S. government assistance to Georgia from 2001 until 2006. The sector “Security & Law Enforcement” has been growing while other sectors remained fairly constant. [Values are not adjusted for inflation. Assistance through the Millennium Challenge Account is not included. Source: U.S. Department of State.]

Of all the sectors of U.S. assistance to Georgia, “Security & Law Enforcement” has increased the most. In 2006, this sector consisted of about \$12 million in “Foreign Military Financing,” \$8 million in “Export Control & Related Border Security Assistance,” and \$7 million in “Law Enforcement Assistance.” Assistance for “Democratic Reform,” which includes support for independent media and the civil society sector, has remained fairly constant. Yet even while assistance for democratization has remained steady at approximately \$18 million per year, the composition of the “Democratic Reform” sector has changed greatly. After 2003, the U.S. government focused efforts on strengthening the executive branch. In a FY 2003 report, Washington summarized its assistance strategy for Georgia:

The USG [U.S. government] has offered its help to Georgia’s new leadership in advancing their declared agenda, which includes far-reaching political and economic reform and an aggressive anti-corruption campaign. (“U.S. Government Assistance”)

Since 2003, Georgia's economy has been growing at a rapid pace culminating in more than twelve percent growth in GDP in 2007 and a sharp increase in foreign direct investment. International resonance has been very positive. In 2008, the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation ranked Georgia 32nd, up from 68th, on its index of economic freedom ("Index of Economic Freedom"). The World Bank ranked Georgia 15th in its annual report on *Doing Business* in 2008.

There is a commonly held assumption that economic growth is more likely to take place under authoritarian regimes and that, once prosperous, countries will democratize. Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi showed that authoritarian regimes, no matter how economically stable, offer no advantage in "attaining the dual goal of development and democracy" (Przeworski et al. 2). Nevertheless, the success of Georgia's economic growth has made it relatively easy for the U.S. government to justify its support for the executive branch while overlooking democratic shortcomings. Even after the development of quasi-authoritarian rule, Washington has continued to support the Georgian government.

ADVERSE EFFECTS OF U.S. ASSISTANCE

Saakashvili has consolidated his power by amending the Georgian constitution, which is now markedly less liberal than it was prior to 2003. Shortly after the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili extended the powers of the president and contracted those of other institutions, most notably the parliament. The president now appoints the prime minister, cabinet members, and even officials such as university provosts. In addition, the president can dissolve parliament if it rejects the president's choice of prime minister or the president's proposed budget. As a result, parliament has lost one of its primary functions: control over the state budget, which is now entirely at the discretion of the president. "Parliament has largely become an implementer of executive initiatives" and has been called the "government's notary" (Lanskoy and Areshidze 160; Papava 2). In 2007, Saakashvili pressed the parliament to extend "the term of

the standing Parliament from April to October–December 2008, anticipating security challenges that might stem from coinciding elections in Russia and Georgia in April 2008” (Nodia 236).

According to Lincoln Mitchell, “Saakashvili enjoys more formal power than Shevardnadze ever did” (672). In an attempt to consolidate power, Saakashvili reinvigorated Georgian nationalism and vowed to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia long before the war in August 2008. “Indeed, it is Saakashvili’s populist and patriotic drumbeating that makes his preference for illiberal democracy so worrisome” (Kupchan 11). Saakashvili is ruling Georgia with a circle of close advisors who are rarely willing to consider dissenting opinions; as a result, the lines between the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party and the government have become blurry. Saakashvili’s largely uncontested power and the lack of opposition forces undoubtedly contributed to a situation whereby he was able to unilaterally declare war on Russia in August 2008.

David Usupashvili, chairman of the opposition Republican Party, charges the United States with contributing to the high concentration of power around Saakashvili: “The political elites [in Georgia] are supported by Washington, and this helps to keep them in power and arrests democratization” (Kupchan 12). Despite Saakashvili’s nationalist rhetoric, orders to crack down on peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi, the closing of independent television stations, and other blatant signs of anti-democratic governance, Washington continued to fund and support his regime.

The effects of U.S. assistance to Georgia are two-dimensional. First, U.S. support for the Saakashvili regime slowed down democratization in Georgia. Some scholars argue that post-Soviet states, with the exception of the Baltic countries, have not made any significant progress toward democratization. Carothers and Larry Diamond consider most post-Soviet states static “hybrid regimes,” with a mix of limited democratic elements—such as managed elections—in otherwise predominantly authoritarian systems (Carothers 2002; Diamond). Henry Hale argues that political changes in most post-Soviet states are cyclical rather than transformational. On Hale’s view, the Rose Revolution would be considered part

of a cyclical oscillation, with different elite factions competing for power.

In the case of Russia, Hale's analysis appears to be very convincing. However, Georgia exhibits some important structural differences that may render Hale's theory inapplicable. First, Georgian elites are less rich and influential compared with their Russian, Ukrainian, and even Central Asian counterparts. As a country with no significant resource reserves, Georgia had little wealth to distribute to patronage networks after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Second, a strong correlation between democratization and prospective European Union (EU) membership has been demonstrated, and the effects of prospective EU membership on democracy in Georgia are substantial: "For the Georgian case, democracy is analogous with becoming part of Europe [and NATO], because we look at EU [and NATO] not only as economic or military organizations but as clubs of democratic countries" (Rondeli). Additionally, unlike Russia and the Central Asian states, Georgia participates in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which provides further incentive to democratize. This essay follows Michael McFaul's rather optimistic analysis of democracy in some post-Soviet states, such as Georgia, and considers the Rose Revolution a breakthrough on the path toward democracy. According to this theory, Saakashvili's presidency has slowed, but not reversed Georgian democratization.

The second effect of U.S. assistance in Georgia was the creation of a false sense of security in Tbilisi. Without significant political opposition, Saakashvili increasingly oriented his country toward the West, making EU and NATO membership a top priority. Strong U.S. support for NATO membership encouraged Tbilisi to continue its rigorously pro-Western direction and allowed Saakashvili to strike an increasingly hostile foreign policy agenda with Moscow that was not mitigated by political opposition, independent media, or NGOs in Georgia. The most lucid example of this false sense of security is perhaps best found in Washington's support for Georgian NATO membership. In an article for the *Financial Times*, Francis Fukuyama summarizes the consequences of

U.S. support in the following way:

The Bush Administration was not and could not have been serious about NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine to the extent that it meant providing not just arms and advisers, but real security guarantees of [American] forces. To the extent that that was so, leading the Georgians on to believe that we would get them into the club soon was a big mistake. (11)

Strong U.S. support for the Saakashvili's regime posed significant obstacles for political opposition and encouraged him to overestimate the strength of Georgia's position vis-à-vis Russia. Both factors significantly contributed to Saakashvili's decision to engage in a war with Russia.

Despite the outcome, there is no evidence that Washington was seeking a war between Russia and Georgia. On the contrary, numerous U.S. government statements indicate the opposite. Just a few weeks before the outbreak of the war on August 7, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a press conference with Saakashvili:

It is extremely important that the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia be resolved on the basics—basis of principles that respect that territorial integrity, that respect the need for them to be resolved peacefully. We have noted concerns that violence should be—should not be carried out by any party. (qtd. in "Remarks with Georgian President")

During a private dinner with Saakashvili, Rice was even more explicit in her demands. According to a senior administration official, "she told him [Saakashvili], in no uncertain terms, that he had to put a non-use of force pledge on the table" (qtd. in Cooper and Shanker A10). Despite Rice's demands, Georgia went ahead with plans to recapture South Ossetia in a Blitzkrieg-like operation, thus risking open conflict with Russia, which had previ-

ously pledged to defend the territorial integrity of the break-away regions. Confirming Washington's worst fears, Russia's military crushed Georgia's army and caused significant economic damage while harming Georgia's state integrity.

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, Saakashvili extended his power base at the expense of democracy in Georgia. During his term, the Georgian constitution has become significantly less liberal, and the Georgian parliament has lost several important functions. He has drastically increased military spending and let relations with Moscow sharply deteriorate. Despite some early signs of Saakashvili's "problematic ruling," Washington has continued to support the executive branch of the Georgian system and neglected independent media and civil society sectors.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the political and economic reform process in Georgia, Alexander Rondeli, director of one of the few remaining Georgian NGOs, described Saakashvili's regime as "social surgery without anesthesia" (qtd. in Schellinger). Before the recent war with Russia, there was a prevalent idea within the Georgian government that the Georgian people had to swallow some "sour pills" to overcome domestic and international challenges. For Saakashvili, democratic consolidation is clearly no longer a top priority. In his view, Georgia must first overcome security and economic challenges before making the "leap to democracy". The problems associated with this theory are grave. It presumes that democratization can be "put on hold" and then "resumed" at the whim of governing elites.

For the Bush administration, Georgia has lost its place as the "beacon of democracy." It has turned into the latest disaster of the administration's democracy-promotion agenda. Washington's strong support for the executive branch of the Georgian government perverted the "liberal agenda" of promoting democracy and security in Georgia. U.S. assistance strengthened the Saakashvili regime at the expense of independent media and the civil society

sector. Even Washington's realist interests have been severely damaged as a result of unbalanced U.S. democracy promotion. After the war with Russia, Georgia's national security was threatened, its territorial integrity severely harmed, and its economy shaken. Today, Georgia is less valuable to the United States as a regional partner, and Saakashvili's government faces serious challenges from opposition leaders. The White House's seemingly unshakable trust in Saakashvili's democratization plans—a trust that was perhaps based on Georgia's economic success—secured U.S. government assistance for Saakashvili's government. The case of Georgia has shown that linking democracy promotion to a single political leader while neglecting critical elements of democratic consolidation is not an effective strategy. In a sense, U.S. government assistance has contributed to the rise of authoritarian elements—and an illiberal constitution—in Georgia.

Democracy in Georgia is not the only thing at stake; what is more important, perhaps, is the legitimacy of U.S. democracy-promotion efforts as a whole. The United States should promote broad democratization rather than hyper-powerful executive regimes. Otherwise, as Mitchell points out, "state-corporatist" models—such as China and Russia—may become an attractive alternative for hybrid regimes around the world (Mitchell 74).

The case of Georgia has important policy implications for U.S. democracy promotion. If some cases of the 1990s taught the U.S. that democracy promotion does not automatically reinforce state-building, the case of Georgia demonstrates how a strong emphasis on state-building can lead to the emergence of authoritarian elements and harm the broader agenda of democracy promotion.

There is hope that democracy in Georgia could benefit from more "de-personalized" relations between Washington and Tbilisi under the Presidency of Barack Obama. The new U.S. government should now consider shifting to a strategic balance between the promotion of state-building and support for civil society. This should include funding for independent media and civic organizations, as well as support for political parties in Georgia.

The rewards for Washington could be mixed. Georgia might

become less hostile toward Russia and perhaps more cautious on issues related to energy and the war in Iraq. Most likely, however, it would remain a reliable partner of the United States. On the other hand, if true democratization is resumed, Georgia could become a “true” outpost at the frontier of freedom and serve as an example of successful U.S. democracy promotion strategy.

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