

Georgia: Before and After the Rose Revolution

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This article is conceived as a short overview of the recent and ongoing developments in the history of Georgia, in particular since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Against this background we shall address the issue of Georgian identity...

Introduction: The issue of nation-building and national identity

As the inhabitants of Georgia are happy to point out, their country is located at the boundary between Europe and Asia. The multi-ethnic state in the Caucasian region is marked by extremely diverse political and cultural history and geography, while everyday life in Georgia has been highly affected by political and ethnical tensions, in particular since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These include not only the continual geo-political tensions with Russia, but also the separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After around 190 years of Russian and Soviet rule, which was only briefly interrupted between 1918 and 1921, Georgia has been an independent state since 1991.

Unlike some other ethnic groups in the Russian/Soviet Empire, the history and process of nation-building in Georgia fall back on a long tradition and have their roots before the era of Sovietization. Examples of important factors for nation-building are a well-developed nobility and thus several active and dominant elites, Christianity, which already had become the state religion at the beginning of the fourth century and the Georgian language, which dates back to the fifth century. Georgia maintained a tradition of statehood, albeit short-lived and fragmented, and thus a tradition of nation-building. Between the 11th and 13th century several principalities in the Southern Caucasus region succeeded in creating a Georgian kingdom, but since the 13th century the nation-building process has been repeatedly interrupted. The Russian annexation of Georgia in 1801 and its incorporation into the USSR in 1921 are the most prominent examples of this since the 19th century.

If one were to attempt to briefly and concisely identify the historical and cultural elements by which the national consciousness of the Georgians was and is manifested or by which elements the national idea as such is constructed, three building blocks come to mind: fatherland, language and faith. These are the three definitive concepts formulated by Ilia Chavchavadze, one of the leading figures of the Georgian national movement in the second half of the 19th century. These were and still are the programmatic core themes of the national movement, which the development of the national identity and spirit of independence in Georgia drew inspiration from.

At this point it should be noted that the history of nation-building or even the origin of a nation for numerous peoples of the Russian/Soviet Empire dates back to the Soviet period, and not the pre-Soviet era. This only partially applies to Georgia. However,

one should bear in mind here that Georgia had a well-developed sentiment of national consciousness and pride from the late 1970s of the 20th century into the late-Soviet period and was more ethnically consolidated than was the case in 1921, for example.

Along with the Baltic States, Georgia was the one of the most zealous proponents of independence and was one of the few republics, in which the elites of the national movement were already able to consolidate at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s.

Although a situation of absolute and direct political dependence between the Soviet Republic of Georgia and the Soviet Union existed, there are some indications that Georgia – located at the periphery of the empire – was able to maintain a more traditional social order and independent cultural and national identity. In particular cultural elements such as language and literature were able to sustain their national character.

If we draw on theories of nationalism and conceive nation-building as a conglomerate of “integration”, “demarcation”, and “imagination”, it becomes clear how crucial Georgia’s efforts to distance itself from the Soviet Union were for the Georgian self-perception. In fact, Georgia’s foreign policy alignment in the post-Soviet era is marked by this very wish and endeavor. However, before we address the foreign policy of the Republic of Georgia, we shall first briefly outline domestic political developments since the 1990s.

Domestic political developments – a brief overview

The first President of Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was Zviad Gamsakhurdia, one of the leading figures of the Georgian opposition during the Soviet period. From the late 1970s he was consistently one of the leaders of the protest movements against the Soviet regime. During the early years of independence Georgia was plagued by the same circumstances as other former Soviet Republics. Their insistence on independent statehood was punished with an economic boycott by Russia. The year 1991 under Gamsakhurdia’s presidency was characterized by domestic repressions, economic chaos and ethnic conflicts with minorities (Abkhazians, Ossetians). As already mentioned, this was further complicated by the drive for independence by several ethnic groups in Georgia, which contributed above all to the de-stabilization of the President and the entire government. With regard to Gamsakhurdia no positive developments could be observed either: he vilified the opposition and had his political opponents arrested. During these years Georgia became internationally isolated, both from Moscow as well as the west.

Already in late 1991-early 1992 a power struggle emerged between the President and the newly formed opposition. In January 1992 the President and his partisans left the country. Gamsakhurdia, who was extremely popular when taking over power, was accused of not bringing about a change of the system, rather only a “changing of the guard”.

The transitional government at that time approached Eduard Shevardnadze with the request to return to Georgia. Shevardnadze had been the First Secretary of the

Georgian Soviet Republic from 1972 until 1985 and then held the position of Foreign Minister until 1990.

Immediately after his arrival in Tbilisi in March 1992 the politician, who was respected both by Moscow as well as the West, founded among other things a foundation for the “Georgian Renaissance and Democracy” with his own savings and for the sake of increasing his personal popularity. Shevardnadze was appointed to become the President of the National Council, which was to function as a transitional parliament. The displaced President Gamsakhurdia initially fled to Armenia via Azerbaijan.

The Georgian population at that time viewed Shevardnadze as a great hope and a stabilizing factor in a country in 1992, in which haphazard rule and chaos prevailed, in which industrial production had almost come to a stop, and in which Abkhazia separated from Tbilisi in a secession war and the adherents of the first President Gamsakhurdia were again mobilizing in Western Georgia. The regular army of Georgia was still being set up and therefore could not yet intervene to bring order. Officers, equipment as well as heavy arms were still lacking.

At this point in time there were already armed conflicts in Abkhazia, which was striving for independence. After months of conflicts in autumn 1993 the troops of the Georgian government had suffered continual military losses. According to Georgian opinion, these strikingly quick military successes of the Abkhazian troops would have been inconceivable without Russian weapons and officers as well as Chechen free fighters. Tbilisi contended that it was due to their assistance that it lost Abkhazia and had to accept a humiliating cease-fire. The last Georgian troops left Abkhazia on September 30th, 1993, followed by thousands of displaced Georgian persons, who fled to Svanetia (the north-western region of Georgia). President Shevardnadze declared a state of emergency, as ethno-political conflicts appeared to be escalating in other areas of Georgia as well.

In autumn 2003 the Georgian government was quick to take the next crucial step: Georgia joined the CIS and allowed Moscow to station Russian troops in Georgia for the long-term. As a result the “fortunes of war” abruptly changed. Russia deployed its troops to vital strategic areas for Georgia and provided the troops of the Georgian government arms and ammunition.

As for domestic political developments until 2003, the following observations can be made – the government indeed introduced basic democratic rules, but did not subvert the traditionally dominant clan structures and attempt to eradicate corruption. Hence, everyday life was dominated by corruption and an increasing level of crime within legal institutions. This was compounded by a massive loss of trust in political institutions and in particular Shevardnadze among the population as well as the international community. During the decade between 1993 and 2003 a continual deterioration of the economic and political situation could be observed. One of the most important accusations made by the opposition was that the presidential family exploited the predominant structures for its personal financial benefit and became increasingly rich.

At the same time Shevardnadze was unable to unite Georgia from within after years of civil war. The autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and Adjara as well as the autonomous region of South Ossetia developed into stabilized de-facto regimes

under his rule.

A change of power appeared to be imminent before the parliamentary elections in November 2003. Two strong oppositional alliances had formed, which had already won the regional elections in 2002. They were known as the United National Movement under the leadership of the early Minister of Justice Mikhail Saakashvili and so-called Burjanadze Democrats under the leadership of the President of Parliament Nino Burjanadze and her predecessor in office, Zurab Zhvania. They were opposed by the electoral alliance of the President "For a New Georgia".

On November 2nd, 2003 elections to the Georgian Parliament were held, but were considered by domestic and international observers to be widely manipulated. Saakashvili declared himself to be the winner on the basis of electoral exit polls by independent institutes and called on the Georgians to demonstrate against Shevardnadze and participate in civil disobedience against the government.

Immediately afterwards massive demonstrations against the government began on the streets of Tbilisi, which soon also spilled over to all larger cities in Georgia. Saakashvili mobilized the opposition. At the end of November supporters of the opposition stormed the Parliament building with roses in their hands (the Rose Revolution), gained access to the plenary hall and interrupted the opening speech of the President. Shverdnadze escaped from the building with his bodyguards. Shortly after he declared a state of emergency and began mobilizing troops and police units in against the demonstrators from his near-by residence. However, the elite troops refused to follow his command.

On the evening of November 23rd, Shevardnadze met with the opposition leaders Saakashvili and Zhvania to negotiate. The meeting was coordinated by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov. After the meeting the President declared his resignation. The news of this triggered euphoria in the streets of Tbilisi.

The next elections were held in January 2004, during which the opposition leader Mikhail Saakashvili achieved a landslide victory. A new Parliament was also elected several weeks later.

Since 2004 the government of Georgia has indeed initiated various reforms and cracked down on corruption. However, various civil rights groups and the parliamentary opposition have expressed their concerns over authoritarian trends in Saakashvili's policies. Indeed the establishment of a democracy under the leadership of the western oriented Mikhail Saakashvili is still a challenge even three years later. The foreign policy of Georgia is characterized by the desire to make its independence from Russia irreversible and pave the path towards EU and NATO membership. The domestic political situation in Georgia has remained fairly complex. We are only going to outline the main dilemmas and issues here.

On the one hand, the Georgian government's fight against corruption gives rise to hopes for democracy. On the other hand, the political pressure on the media, the system of justice and Saakashvili's style of governing is to a great extent marked by his inclination towards populism and his lacking willingness to compromise. Has Georgia truly become a democracy or did new people come to power, who indeed exploit democratic rhetoric, but offer no long-term practical solutions for the foreign

policy and economic difficulties of the country? The change in power three years ago was successful. However, did a “regime change” really take place? These are all questions, which cannot be easily answered today.

Foreign policy developments – in brief

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the concept of geo-politics was addressed, the government in Tbilisi became conscientious of the geo-political situation of Georgia, which one might define as fateful: the long border with the Northern Caucasus which belongs to Russia and includes Chechnya, the Black Sea coastline with the military ports, the border with Turkey, Armenia to the South, whose territory links Georgia with the Middle East, as well as oil-rich Azerbaijan with its links to Central Asia.

The Georgian government’s attempts to conduct an independent and balanced foreign policy between 1991 and today have failed. We shall sketch the crucial issues and strategic constellations:

Although the relations between Georgia and Russia were tense since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both countries maintained close economic ties over the years until autumn 2006. A deterioration of these relations at the political level could be continually observed over the years. That is why the escalation in autumn 2006 was no real surprise for many observers. What is more surprising is the extent of this set of problems. There are diverse reasons for the tense situation, but in order to avoid going into extensive details, we will only mention a few of them:

The Georgian government accuses Russia of intervening into the domestic affairs of the country, as was the case with the two separatist republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia accuses its northern neighbor of pursuing the annexation of the Republic of South Ossetia, which has de facto separated from Georgia. In the 1990s Russia’s political interests in the Caucasus were already unmistakable. It is now no longer a secret that the Abkhazian government is striving to join the Russian Federation and that Abkhazian politicians have been flocking to Moscow. Tens of thousands of Abkhazian citizens have received Russian passports without red tape. According to the Georgian government, Georgia does not tolerate foreign interventions. However the conflict on the territory of a neighboring country eventually became a matter of domestic security for Russia. It would be interesting to observe how this conflict was portrayed in Georgia. For example, one might be inclined to analyze the speeches of politicians in order to determine how this foreign policy conflict with Russia was depicted with regard to the intervention into domestic affairs.

An additional bone of contention concerns the four one-time Soviet military bases on Georgian territory, which Russia still maintains. Two of them were supposed to be already closed in 2001 according to an international agreement, which did not take place though. In 2005 an agreement with regard to the Russian military bases was signed, which provides for a complete withdrawal by 2008. However, in view of the current developments in the relations between Georgia and Russia, the conflict over the troop withdrawal is likely to continue. Russian foreign policy in the Southern Caucasus is still strongly impacted by the loss of territory and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Georgia is reacting to this with its most provocative weapon – its orientation towards the west, i.e. NATO, the European Union and USA. In this regard, Russia demands from Georgia a treaty, in which Georgia commits to not allow any

new military bases from third-countries.

The diplomatic visits between these two states, which were supposed to set a more harmonious and reconciliatory tone, led to further turbulence in most cases. For instance, the following symbolic act reveals the state of Georgian-Russian relations in the past 15 years particularly well: in the year 2005 Georgian protesters and demonstrators laid a wreath in front of the Russian embassy in Tbilisi with the following words written on the bow: "Our condolences on the death of Russian foreign policy".

Even though Georgia has been a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States since 1993, it has consistently searched for new geo-political partners. Of particular interest in this regard are the efforts undertaken by the Georgian government between 1991 and 1993. These include the foundations of alliances such as the Caucasian House, which later became the Trans-Caucasian House, before being renamed "Joint Caucasian Dialogue". These activities failed primarily because the three Southern Caucasian states did not share common interests and were hence not inclined to develop common policies: However, such endeavors are interesting when viewed as an effort to find allies in the region to assert independent policies vis-à-vis Moscow. A new initiative known as "Peaceful Caucasus" was presented in 1996.

Georgia's orientation towards the West primarily consists of two basic components: firstly a public relations project propagated by the President, which is less concerned with political and policy substance, rather concentrates on emphasizing the significance of relations to Western Europe at the domestic level, while in terms of foreign policy it aims to gather political support for Georgia's strategy of distancing itself from post-imperial Russia.

The symbolic visit of the US President in 2005 signified above all a triumph for Saakashvili's image. It is not necessary to go into details on how the country prepared for this visit. It suffices to say that the day was declared a public holiday, meaning that no one in Georgia had to work.

In symbolic terms, the Bush visit represented a milestone, a manifest turn in Georgia's foreign policy alignment. The USA made it as clear as possible that it wishes to remain present in the Southern Caucasus and regard this region as a part of its sphere of interests. This visit also sent a more or less unambiguous message to Moscow: "This is no longer your territory!"

Except for this message, this visit delivered no concrete results for Georgia, and also had little impact on Georgia's aspirations to join NATO.

In June 2004 the three Southern Caucasian States were made part of the EU Neighborhood Policy after long negotiations. Hence, they are among the countries, which have no realistic prospects of joining the EU in the long-term, but receive a certain level of economic and political support. Hence, hope remains that the EU's commitment to the Southern Caucasus will be a strong and binding one which will enable this region move closer to the political, legal and economic standards of the EU.

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Online Newspapers and Magazines on Georgia and Caucasus

http://www.caucaz.com/home_eng/

<http://www.eurasischesmagazin.de/aktuell/> (German-language Internet magazine, which links Europe and Asia)

www.georgien-nachrichten.de

www.georgien.net

www.Tedsnet.de

<http://news.gov.ge/> – News from Press Office of the President of Georgia

<http://civil.ge> – Online Magazine, Daily News

<http://kvali.com> – Online Magazine, News, Special Reports

http://qseli.biz/bpg/bpg_default.asp?CatID=9 – Online Magazine Echo (in Georgian)

<http://www.sakartvelo.ru> – Collection of News and Articles about Georgia (in Russian)

<http://www.primenewsonline.com> – Prime News Agency

<http://www.sarke.com> – Information Agency

<http://www.inews.com.ge/> – Georgian Economic Digest

<http://www.gipc.org.ge> – Georgian International Press Center

<http://www.iagj.org.ge> – Independent Association of Georgian Journalists (IAGJ)

<http://www.opentext.org.ge/pressa> – Catalogue of Georgian Newspapers (in Georgian)

<http://www.geotimes.ge> – The Georgian Times

<http://www.iberiapac.ge/1tv.html> – Georgian Television First Channel

<http://www.rustavi2.com/download.htm> – Broadcasting Company Rustavi-2

<http://www.komuna.ge> – News and Info + Broadcasting Company Rustavi-2 Live

<http://mediaguide.ge/index.en.html> – Georgian Media Guide

<http://www.tavisupleba.org> – RFE/RL Broadcast Service in Georgian

<http://www.rferl.org/newsline> – RFE/RL Daily Newslines on Transcaucasia & Central Asia

<http://www.radio.ge>

<http://www.imedinews.ge/live>

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