

Learning from Georgia's Crisis: Implications and Recommendations

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POLICY PAPER
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Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program

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Summary and Recommendations

This paper provides background, implications, and policy recommendations to the political crisis which unfolded in Georgia in early November. The paper concludes that the crisis resulted primarily from a breakdown in state-society communication, the Saakashvili administration having failed to account for or manage growing discontent with the radical reform policies in the socio-economic area. Meanwhile, an opposition coalition was boosted by the financial and media clout of a well-known oligarch to function as a funnel for discontent.

The arguably disproportionate government reaction and crackdown was driven by a genuine belief that the situation risked developing into considerable domestic turmoil. These fears should be viewed against the background of Russia's relentless challenge to Georgian statehood, generating a constant state of crisis in Georgian foreign relations, and providing a significant impediment to domestic democratic development. The opposition's choice to utilize the momentum provided by the demonstrations to push for regime change served to further fuel these fears.

The episode has highlighted a lack of checks and balances and continued predominance of informal decision-making structures in Georgia's political system. In light of these implications, a set of policy recommendations are provided for the Georgian government, as well as Western governments seeking to aid Georgia's democratic development:

Recommendations to the Georgian Government:

- **Ensure free and fair elections and media freedom.**

The limited timeframe of the election cycle provides a challenge for the Government. In order to restore its credibility it is vital that the Georgian Government ensures free and fair elections. Given the short timeframe, this will require securing strong presence of international monitors, ensuring that the opposition is provided with access to

campaigning tools and avoiding the use of administrative resources for campaigning. If these conditions are not met, the opposition may again bring its campaign to the streets, or even be provided with arguments for challenging the election results. With limited time at hand for both the Government and opposition to regain the confidence of the public, there is also an obvious risk for a low voter turnout.

The return of Imedi TV to the airwaves is a crucial step in rebuilding the media freedom that is crucial to any democratic society. The EU's move to bring in – and Georgia's decision to invite – Polish intellectual Adam Michnik to oversee the media process is a positive move in the right direction; moreover, the emergence of an NGO media council designed to apply ethical and coverage standards is a welcome development.

Beyond the presidential elections, the Georgian Government should ensure in good time that the Parliamentary election are held in a free and fair atmosphere and invite numerous observers; request foreign partners to help develop its media institutions and to develop the professionalism and ethics of journalism in the country.

- **Build a fundamentally new approach to communications.**

Following this crisis, it is imperative that the Georgian Government do a much better job in building a dialogue with society. This can only be done by investing much more energy in a communications strategy that has a twofold purpose: (1) to reach out to the people, not least in outlying regions, to explain the Government's policies and their long-term benefits; and (2) to enable the Government to sense the popular mood and understand the problems in society. To this effect, the Georgian president should, immediately following the presidential election, set up a commission to develop a new communications strategy including a comprehensive overhaul of government offices' outreach mechanisms. The government should work closely with western partners to reform and upgrade state institutions dealing with the public.

- **Strengthen the role of state institutions in the policy process and suppress the factor of informal politics.**

The Georgian political system lacks sufficient checks and balances,

and Georgian politics remain overly influenced by informal networks rather than formal institutions. Georgia under Saakashvili has been characterized by a very dominant ruling elite, comprised of a President with strong executive powers and a Parliament dominated by the ruling National Movement. In many important decisions, informal decision-making mechanisms rather than the cabinet of ministers have strong influence, a process lacking in institutional basis and accountability and which inevitably arouses suspicion.

The Georgian president elected on January 5 should seek to reverse this trend and ensure that power is exercised by the cabinet of ministers and other constitutional organs, and avoid resort to informal networks and “kitchen cabinets”. The persons that the President trusts the most to implement his policies should therefore also have adequate positions that appropriately reflect their influence and position. This will ensure a clear chain of command and decisions taken in an accountable fashion.

- **Step up pace of reform in Ministry of Internal Affairs and more broadly in the building of the rule of law.**

For the continued popular legitimacy of the police, it is important that Mr. Saakashvili, if elected, make good on his claim to investigate allegations of excessive use of force and that violators are punished. Beyond this, reinvigorated measures are needed to build a police force that, even in difficult circumstances, treats citizens with professionalism and respect. This is likely to require continued training and education of police applicants and officers. Moreover, the building and consolidation of the rule of law in Georgia needs to be given additional priority, especially as concerns consolidating the independence of the judiciary. In particular, the judiciary needs to be strengthened and provided with sufficient independence from the executive.

The government should allocate greater funds for the training of police and Interior Ministry officials in human rights. The President should also take steps to oversee the media situation in the country. This should have two purposes: to protect the media from government

intervention; and to work for increased professionalism in the Georgian media, building on the media council being created.

Recommendations to Western Governments and Organizations

- **Abandon the false premise that sustainable democratic development in Georgia or anywhere is possible in the absence of sovereignty and security.**

For the past four years, the Georgian Government has been continuously in crisis mode as a result of the high levels of insecurity produced by Russian economic warfare and military provocations, as well as by the continued lack of resolution of the unresolved conflicts on Georgia's territory. Its inability to gauge the public mood, the siege mentality that appears to have affected the Government, and its arguably disproportionate response to the November events all to some extent relate to the Georgian Government's inability to move from crisis mode to normality in its execution of power. At the very basic level, this is directly related to the security deficit of the country, and the lack of substantial Western attention to the fundamental security problems of Georgia in particular and the South Caucasus more generally.

The events of November 2007 only reinforce the conclusion that long-term sustainable democracy is unlikely to be built in the absence of basic security. This is one area where the comparison between Georgia and the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe breaks down. Compared to the successful democratization processes in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, Georgia faces a security threat much more acute and existential in nature than any of those countries, including the Baltic states, ever did. Moreover, Georgia enjoys less Western – in particular European – support in terms of membership prospects in the EU and NATO, than those countries did. As long as that is the case, Georgia is unlikely to single-handedly develop into a consolidated and secure democracy.

Western governments need to acknowledge that their refusal to engage with Georgia on a serious basis in security issues impedes the country's development and thereby also important Western interests.

In particular, the failure of the international community to support Georgia's efforts to alter the status quo as concerns conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia impedes Georgia's stability and development and thereby also Western interests in a stable neighborhood and a stable conduit for Caspian energy resources. Flowing from this, the consequence for the West of the November events is not that Georgia has failed the test of democracy and therefore deserves less support, but exactly the opposite: that only more substantial investments in Georgia's security can contribute to the building of a stable and democratic Georgia, itself something in the interest of the West.

- **Contribute to post-election stability by urging restraint from the opposition.**

Western governments should use opportunities of contact with Georgia's opposition parties to discourage a return to street protests on January 6 in case Mr. Saakashvili is legitimately re-elected; and urge opposition parties to voice their demands within the framework of democratic institutions.

- **Work with the Georgian Government on police reform.**

The November events indicated the need for further reform of the Georgian police forces, a factor in which Western governments and organizations can and should play a leading role. The EU in particular, through the European Neighborhood Policy, and play a key role in promoting professionalism and understanding of modern, democratic crowd control methods in the Georgian police force. This will require substantial engagement and long-term funding.

- **Work with the Georgian Government on communication strategy.**

Georgia's Western partners can and should play an important role in supporting the Government's efforts to upgrade and reform its strategy for outreach and communication to the people.

Introduction

Georgia's post-revolutionary government faced its most significant challenge to date in early November, as an increasingly radicalized opposition alliance served as a funnel for growing discontent with the Government's socio-economic policies. A November 7 government crackdown and the introduction of a State of Emergency ended the standoff, but tarnished the Government's democratic credentials. President Saakashvili sought to mitigate damage by announcing snap presidential elections, lifting the state of emergency, and gradually allowing the oppositional Imedi TV channel back on air.

The episode is likely to have medium-term implications for Georgia's future stability and development. To begin with, Russia is certain to exploit Georgia's weakened situation, at a time when both domestic Russian politics and the Kosovo question make irresponsible behavior on the part of the Kremlin increasingly likely. Conversely, the crisis and the way it was handled has led to weakened support for Georgia in the West. Georgia-watchers in the policy and expert communities appear divided both over the crisis itself and what transpired, as well as over how to move forward constructively. This policy paper seeks to provide an analysis of the implications of the crisis and conclusions to be drawn from it. Its purpose is to inform the policy debate on how to move forward Georgia's process of state-building, democratization, and Euro-Atlantic integration. The paper begins with a short background to the crisis, followed by an analysis of its implications and recommendations for both the Georgian and Western governments.

Analysis of the Background to the November crisis

Domestic discontent with the Saakashvili administration's policies had been growing for some time, and was patently obvious prior to the crisis itself. For the past year or more, substantial tracts of the Georgian population were growing patently uneasy with the consequences of the Saakashvili administration's liberalizing reforms. In fact, the very reforms that made

Georgia a poster-child in many international rankings seemed to backfire domestically.

The government's problem was both one of substance and one of communication. In terms of substance, liberalizing reforms had affected many Georgians negatively, a particularly explosive factor given the high expectations that the rose revolution would bring prosperity and stability, expectations also fueled by the Government itself. In this sense, the growing dissatisfaction echoed the experience of Eastern European states that accomplished rapid reforms, and where many reformist leaders were voted out of office. But more importantly, the Saakashvili administration had a communication problem. While it succeeded in presenting itself as a leading reformer internationally, it failed to make its case convincingly enough to its own population. The government at times appeared deaf and arrogant to the socio-economic concerns of sections of the population, perhaps in the conviction that the fruits of reforms would eventually quiet these voices.

This explains the growing discontent and the size of the demonstrations that began on November 2. However, it does not explain the intense polarization of the Georgian political scene, or the violent outcome of the standoff.

The Demonstrations

Following a series of controversies between the Georgian Government and the opposition in the fall of 2007, a first round of public protests were initiated on November 2. At least 50,000 demonstrators gathered on the streets of Tbilisi in protest against continuing poverty, the lack of employment opportunities, and a weak social welfare system. At the forefront of the demonstrations stood ten opposition parties, united in the coalition "National Council of Unified Public Movement."¹ For several

¹ The Council Movement was formed shortly after the arrest of ex-defence Minister Irakli Okruashvili. Originally, the coalition comprised the Republican Party (Davit Usupashvili); Conservative Party (Kakha Kukava, Zviad Dzidziguri); Georgia's Way (Salome Zourabichvili); Freedom – (Konstantine Gamsakhurdia); On Our Own (Paata Davitaia); Party of People (Koba Davitashvili); Movement for United Georgia (Irakli Okruashvili), Georgian Troupe (Jondi Bagaturia), Labor Party (Shalva Natelashvili) and National Forum (Kakha Shartava). The Labor Party later withdrew from the coalition.

months, these opposition forces had been campaigning on a set of radical demands, including most prominently the abolition of the institution of the presidency, and the possible reintroduction of the Constitutional Monarchy – a somewhat bizarre objective, given that the Bagrationi dynasty has been out of power for two centuries, was absorbed into the Russian nobility, lives in exile and has only limited connections with Georgia today. It was also notable that the Catholicos of the Georgian Orthodox Church supported these demands, indicating the increasingly politicized role of the Church in Georgia.

By early November, four concrete demands were put forward to the Government: (1) to hold Parliamentary elections in the spring of 2008 as originally envisaged by the constitution, and not in October as envisaged by constitutional amendments enforced by the administration; (2) to ensure pluralism in the Central Election Commission; (3) to reform the current electoral system, dominated by single-member constituencies; (4) and to release political prisoners (referring to Irakli Batiashvili, sentenced last May to seven years imprisonment for providing intellectual assistance to Kodori warlord Emzar Kvitsiani).

Whereas this was the initial stated goal of the demonstrations, it was also apparent that more was at stake than these relatively technical questions. Indeed, the opposition forces appear to have been divided on the eventual aim of the rallies. Whereas the more responsible leaders of the opposition were certainly advancing concrete demands in good faith, more radical forces appeared more opportunistic, intent on replicating the rose revolution. Indeed, similarities were obvious, as the November demonstrations replicated some of the tactics used four years ago, when protesters were bused in from outlying regions. Moreover, the very day of the beginning of demonstrations, November 2, was the date of the 2003 Parliamentary elections that launched the rose revolution.

With 50,000 protestors gathered on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue on November 2, the Government faced an entirely novel challenge for which it was not mentally prepared: it appeared for the first time to be opposed by powerful forces in the population. Demonstrators did not, to be sure, reflect a

compact societal consensus in the country. While the Government did alienate a significant part of both the elite and the population, it did retain substantial popularity. In a country where, as Ghia Nodia has noted, control of the streets – particularly the area of Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Parliament – is seen as a symbol of legitimacy, this was a very troubling development for the Government.

The opposition's demands were addressed in a first round of negotiations between government and opposition leaders on November 2, but no agreement was reached. Although disputed by the opposition, the Government at this stage reportedly agreed to consider three of the four claims, refusing only to negotiate on the date of the Parliamentary elections. Moving the elections forward would in the Government's view make the Georgian and the Russian elections coincide, something that would make Georgia vulnerable to Russian interference – and in the light of the possible recognition of Kosovo's independence – even intervention in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. However, the opposition refused to negotiate on what it considered being the most important of its demands.

While informal meetings continued to take place between representatives from the ruling party and the opposition in the following days, failure to reach consensus on the opposition's demands continued to bring protesters to the streets, albeit in decreasing numbers. Having kept silent for the first days of demonstrations, tasking Parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze with negotiating with the opposition, President Saakashvili made his first address to the nations on November 4. In a televised speech, while referring to the rallies as normal in a democratic society, he heavily criticized the opposition's attempt to replicate the Rose revolution, pointed at Moscow's interest in staging turmoil in Georgia ahead of the Duma elections, and reiterated the Government's position to hold Parliamentary elections in fall 2008.

Up to this point, demonstrations proceeded peacefully for several days and nights, but a series of tragic mistakes made by both sides sent events spiraling out of control on November 7. First, riding on a sudden momentum (that all knew would not last), the opposition leaders decided to raise the

stakes. Instead of declaring victory and moving ahead when the Government compromised on three of four issues, the opposition instead radicalized its stance. It already by December 3 took the fateful decision to demand the president's resignation, then on Dec 6 decided to set up tent camps outside Parliament, and some leaders even went on hunger strike. In other words, the opposition decided to use the streets, rather than the democratic process, to get its way. The government, for its part, denounced the opposition's call for the president's resignation as blackmail and representing the interests of Moscow rather than the Georgian public.

At this point, the Government appears to have concluded that its willingness to compromise was interpreted as a sign of weakness. It became increasingly clear that at least part of the opposition wanted nothing but the ouster of the Government by popular force, in a sense a repeat of the rose revolution. This interpretation – and the alleged role of a hidden Russian hand behind events – was borne out by taped conversations between some opposition leaders and Russian Foreign Intelligence Service agents.

November 7

On November 7, the number of demonstrators on Rustaveli Avenue had dropped from several tens of thousands to only several hundred. In the morning of November 7th, Georgian police moved in to disperse the remaining protesters, including the hunger-strikers in front of the Parliament. Officials motivated the decision with the need to resume traffic on the capital's main street, as well as countering disruptions of public order. However, the attempt to open up Rustaveli Avenue only provided new energy for the demonstrations. Around noon, opposition leaders managed to gather several thousand protesters and pushed through the police cordons, regaining control of Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Parliament. Riot police then intervened to disperse the protesters, this time using water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets.

In the afternoon of November 7, the Ministry of Interior issued taped phone conversations and video recordings of opposition leaders Levan Berdzenishvili (Republican Party) and Giorgi Khaindrava (independent), and Tsotne Gamsakhurdia, (brother of Freedom party leader Konstantin

Gamsakhurdia), which, according to the Interior Ministry, proved their interaction with Russian intelligence officials. The next day, similar charges were brought against Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili. Commenting on the recordings, several MPs from the ruling party made statements accusing the opposition of engaging in coup plotting and crimes against the state. Others stated that the evidence presented was inadequate and denounced the allegations of opposition leaders collaborating with Russian intelligence as absurd. The government later softened its stance on the issue, terming the mentioned opposition leaders “witnesses” rather than suspects.

Protesters then gathered again at Rike, an open space on the other side of the Mtkvari River, for renewed rallies. The demonstrations were again dispersed by riot police. The same evening, the Imedi television channel, considered to be the opposition’s main media outlet and controlled by opposition leader and oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili, was closed down by detachments from the Interior Ministry. The police operation against Imedi was carried out after the station broadcast a statement by Patarkatsishvili, calling the Government fascist and stating he would use all his financial resources to bring it down. Imedi had during the demonstrations called for rallies, thus exposing itself to criticism for openly taking sides against the Government. Local TV station Kavkasia was simultaneously shut down. According to a statement by News Corporation two days later, Imedi was vandalized to the extent that the station would not be able to resume broadcasting in three months time.

Shortly after the closure of Imedi, Prime Minister Zurab Noghiadeli announced that a State of Emergency was imposed in Tbilisi by a presidential decree, restricting freedom of assembly and the media. This was later followed by a statement by Economy Minister Giorgi Arveladze, extending the state of emergency throughout the country.

The events on November 7th caused 508 people to seek medical care, according to the Georgian Health Care Ministry. 23 police officers were wounded, and 21 demonstrators were arrested. Human Rights Watch and other NGOs, foreign as well as Georgian, reported several instances of excessive and indiscriminate use of force, including shootings with rubber bullets and beatings of fleeing protesters. Police reportedly also prevented media on the site from reporting on events, confiscating camera equipment and beating journalists. Ombudsman Sozar Subari was also beaten by the police. A smaller student demonstration was dispersed outside the university in Batumi on November 8th, marking the hitherto last instance of violence during the events covered.

*Post-Crackdown Developments:
Damage Control*

On November 8th, President Saakashvili announced that new presidential elections were to be held on January 5th. The president also declared that a referendum would be held, to decide whether Parliamentary elections should be carried out in the spring, as the opposition demands, or in the fall, as envisioned by the December 2006 constitutional amendment. Opposition leaders welcomed the decision and

The Imedi TV Issue

The Imedi TV station was founded by Bari Patarkatsishvili in 2003. Patarkatsishvili remained the sole owner until August 2006. In August 2006, Patarkatsishvili sold 49% of the shares of Imedi to News Corp., run by Rupert Murdoch. Still, only one person from News Corp. was physically present in Tbilisi. Patarkatsishvili moved into moderate opposition during 2006, but only declared direct political ambitions in the late summer of 2007.

From September 2007 onward, Imedi came to take on a much more pronounced anti-government editorial policy, and by October, Patarkatsishvili announced he would lead and finance the opposition to the Saakashvili administration and the movement to move the Government out of power. As Imedi TV is widely known to operate at a loss of several million dollars, it was widely assumed that Patarkatsishvili was financing the station's operation.

On October 31, Patarkatsishvili announced he handed his shares in Imedi for one year to News Corp. However, in spite of Georgian legislation to that effect, no document registering the change of ownership and control over the station was handed in to Georgian authorities within the 10 days stipulated by law. It is apparent that the agreement for News Corp. to exercise full control and management was not in effect in the period until the station was shut down.

termed it a successful outcome of the protests. In addition, the Government decided to simultaneously hold a parallel referendum on NATO accession.

The Government, meanwhile, continued to accuse Russia of being involved in staging the demonstrations in order to undermine Georgian statehood. Three Russian diplomats were charged with engagement in subversive activities and expelled. Russia responded by expelling three Georgian diplomats.

The immediate crisis seemed to recede after November 8th. On November 10th, Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze, Vice Speaker Machavariani and two majority MPs resumed talks with selected opposition representatives. These included David Usupashvili (Republican Party), Salome Zourabishvili (Georgia's Way) and Kakha Kukava (Conservatives) from the nine party opposition coalition, as well as representatives from the New Rights and Industrialist parties, which did not take part in the demonstrations. During a second round of talks on November 12th, the four original demands of the nine-party coalition were again subject of negotiation. Progress was reportedly made especially on reform of the election code. Opposition representatives also raised new demands, including lifting the state of emergency, lifting restrictions on the media (especially Imedi) and stopping the "political repression" of opposition supporters.

The state of emergency was lifted at 7 am on November 16th. Since then, the closure of Imedi became the most contentious issue, and reopening the station remained the opposition's primary demand. The Government refused to let Imedi back on air in the absence of clarity regarding its ownership and control, citing the need to avert a situation where Imedi continues to function as a propaganda machine for Patarkatsishvili's ambition to overthrow the Government. Instead, the Government sought to ensure that Imedi was controlled professionally. To this end, it proposed that News Corp. took over full control of the channel. Meanwhile, demonstrations re-emerged for the opening of the station, while the Government was subjected to increased pressure from Europe and the United States on the issue. Polish publicist and former anti-communist leader Adam Michnik was invited by

the Government to mediate in the process of getting Imedi back on the air, and more generally to oversee the Georgian media's coverage of the elections. On November 16th, Prime Minister Noghaideli resigned, leading to the resignation of the entire Government. Lado Gurggenidze, director of the national bank, was appointed to succeed him. The government was later reappointed with minor alterations. On November 25th, President Saakashvili resigned to become a candidate in the presidential election. The nine-party opposition coalition nominated independent Member of Parliament Levan Gachechiladze as their joint candidate. Aside from Gachechiladze, Gamkrelidze, Patarkatsishvili and Natelashvili as well as lesser-known figures have been nominated to take part in the election. The opposition coalition's strategy appears to be to unite to win the presidential elections; then to split and run separately for Parliamentary elections.

The Fallout

The events on November 7th, especially imposing the state of emergency and the shutdown of Imedi, triggered concerned statements internationally, with EU, OSCE, CoE and OSCE officials calling for all sides to show restraint, remain calm and resolve the situation through dialogue. Statements critical of the imposition of emergency rule and the closure of Imedi TV were made by NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, while the US State Department gave a statement positive toward the decision to hold early presidential elections, while calling on the Government to lift the state of emergency. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza also called for lifting the state of emergency before departing to Georgia on November 10th. President Saakashvili responded by stating that the state of emergency would not be lifted due to recommendations by "foreign friends". In a press conference in Tbilisi on November 13th, Bryza expressed continued US support for Georgia's NATO-membership and confidence that Georgia's democratization process would continue, provided elections on January 5th are free and fair.

During the second half of November, the Georgian Government took substantial steps to meet the opposition's demands, particularly regarding the electoral code. Beyond the lowering of the threshold for Parliamentary

representation from 7% to 5%, the Government also accepted the transformation of the Parliamentary elections from a majoritarian to a proportional system of representation, divided into a national and several regional party lists. The Central Electoral Commission, previously designed to be staffed by non-political professionals, will now be amended to include representatives of political parties represented in Parliament or having received over 4 percent of the vote in the last Parliamentary elections.

Implications

Several implications can be drawn from the evolution and handling of the crisis.

- **The crisis resulted from a breakdown in state-society communication.** Ever since the Rose revolution in 2003, the Saakashvili-led administration has taken a determined course towards integration into western institutions, in order to meet NATO standards. Meanwhile, discontent among the population concerning continuous social ills including inflation and unemployment has gradually grown. In light of the overwhelming victory of the current administration in the presidential and Parliamentary elections of 2004 – which practically constituted a referendum on the rose revolution – the Government has confidently pursued its domestic and foreign policy agenda, denouncing its opponents as incompetent and underestimating the opportunity handed to the opposition to draw on growing impatience and discontent with short-term implications the Saakashvili administration's economic and social policies. In this sense, the recent crisis is a consequence of the breakdown of the Government's communication with its population. This includes a failure to properly communicate the underlying reasons for the priorities made; the benefits of the Government's foreign policy agenda and, perhaps most importantly, the time required for improving social conditions in the country.
- **The shutdown of an oppositional TV station was a serious mistake.** The government's decision to shut down the oppositional Imedi TV

channel, and particularly the manner in which this was done, constituted an overreaction and a serious mistake, with a questionable legal basis. This problem only began to be undone following intense western pressure and a month after the event, with Imedi back on air on December 12. The conclusion that the closure was an overreaction should not obscure the fact that Imedi was used as a blatant propaganda tool for the opposition to whip up anti-government sentiment. That said, the Government response did not live up to the standards Georgia set for itself.

- **The Ministry of Internal Affairs used disproportionate force.**

Whether or not the situation warranted the imposition of a state of emergency, personnel from the Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel used excessive force against demonstrators in several cases. In dealing with demonstrators as well as in closing down the Imedi TV station, the presence of masked men among police detachments is an issue of concern.

The rather primitive methods used by some police officers are particularly worrisome against the background of the substantial progress recorded in the police since the rose revolution, which brought an improvement of public trust for the police incomparable to any post-Soviet state. This makes it particularly crucial for the Government to act to restore this trust. Given the endemic role of ministries of interior across the post-Soviet space as bastions of authoritarianism, the more modern crowd control methods that were used during this crisis (water cannons etc.) are nevertheless significant and merit attention. Yet it is obvious that the police behavior did not correspond to the standards Georgia has set for itself.

- **The opposition bears significant responsibility for creating and fanning the crisis, particularly as it moved to push for regime change unconstitutionally.**

The responsibility of the opposition should not be neglected. If the Government failed to provide an inclusive political climate with a functioning dialogue with its opponents, the opposition has failed to

present a socio-economic agenda which could constitute a credible alternative to the present administration. Instead, the opposition has taken advantage of the population's growing distrust in Saakashvili and established a platform from which it contests the Government, and seeks regime change. It is telling that the opposition coalition depends on the financial support of an oligarch with a questionable background – Badri Patarkatsishvili – and that its campaign only got off the ground when this support materialized. It is also notable, however, that important political forces such as the New Rights and Industrialists never joined the demonstrations, just as they refused to join the rose revolution.

The demonstrations began as peaceful expressions of discontent, and were allowed to continue without government interference for close to five days. However, it is clear that some of the opposition leaders hijacked these popular demonstrations for the purpose of seeking to bring down the Government by force. The government's will to negotiate was interpreted as a sign of weakness and led not to compromise, but to the radicalization of opposition demands. In this sense, the opposition coalition's handling of the crisis leads to the questioning of its democratic ideals. It is particularly worrisome that in the electoral campaign, several among the opposition leaders appear less interested in the actual elections on January 5 than in staging protests on January 6, should Saakashvili be re-elected. This testifies to a lingering preference for street politics over participation in democratic institutions.

- **The government acted on the basis of genuine fear of ensuing chaos unless it acted, within a context of relentless external pressure that provided a warranted concern for Georgian statehood.**

It is clear that the Government decided to act in the way it did – rightly or wrongly – based on a fear that it was about to lose control of the situation. Even if the actions can be characterized from the outside as an overreaction, it is apparent that numerous convinced Georgian democrats, both inside and outside of government, found the situation so threatening as to warrant these extreme measures. Government

representatives were aware of the negative consequences of their actions, but concluded that doing so was choosing a lesser evil. This response should be understood in the context of Georgia's recent political history, and of the relentless Russian pressure on Georgian statehood.

The growing unrest in Tbilisi led many Georgians to reminisce the state collapse of 1991 that led to the destruction of much of Rustaveli Avenue. This was certainly a factor in the Government overreaction aimed at preventing a renewed state collapse.

An even more important context is Russia's relentless pressure on Georgia and its numerous and consistent policies aimed at undermining the Georgian state. This does not refer mainly to Russia's *direct* role in the recent crisis. Although links between Russian secret services and the events of the past weeks do exist, these played only a small role in the events and to its own peril, the Saakashvili administration has exaggerated these connections. It is the *indirect* Russian role that is of greater importance. Russia's cumulative policies since the rose revolution led to a legitimate concern on the part of the Georgian government that Georgian statehood would be endangered in case of protracted unrest. Moscow has spared no effort to undermine Georgia. It has supported secessionist territories; imposed a trade embargo; cut energy supplies; funded anti-government activities; bombed Georgian territory on at least two occasions; as well as conducted a policy of constant diplomatic agitation against Georgia. These measures have contributed to generating a form of constant siege mentality in the Georgian government, which has been forced to operate in crisis mode for most of the past four years. This siege mentality, coupled with uncertainty regarding Russia's actual direct as well as indirect role in the crisis, was undoubtedly a factor in the Government's decision to use what were arguably disproportionate means to stabilize the situation.

- **The Government's efforts to restore legitimacy should be acknowledged.**

Following the crisis, the Government's subsequent efforts to restore its

legitimacy both internally and externally are significant. The government took a particularly important step in deciding to hold early presidential elections. In light of the demands for his resignation during the demonstrations, President Saakashvili's decision to hold early polls signals to the opposition that it is up to the public to decide on Georgia's immediate future. Equally important is the decision to let the people decide the timing of Georgia's Parliamentary elections, the most contentious issue during the crisis. Moreover, the Government has compromised on numerous issues relating to the electoral system. The threshold for Parliamentary representation has been lowered; the first-past-the-post electoral system, thought to favor the Government, has been abandoned in favor of more proportional representation; and the electoral commissions have been reformed, to name only the most important reforms.

- **Russia continues to exploit Georgia's weakness.**

Russia has for years financially and otherwise supported subversive groups in Georgian society. With a possible upcoming recognition of Kosovo's independence (which Russia opposes but considers using as a precedent in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia), upcoming presidential elections in Russia, and the April NATO summit in Bucharest, the recent crisis works in Moscow's favor. That Moscow is utilizing this opportunity already can be seen by the opening of polling stations for Russia's Parliamentary elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, enabling holders of Russian passports to participate in the December 2007 Duma elections. This constitutes a further development of Russia's annexation policies toward the separatist regions. The statement by Boris Gryzlov, leader of the ruling United Russia party, immediately following Russia's Parliamentary elections to the effect that the Duma will consider recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, only illustrates this situation. Given that President Putin is now officially the head of United Russia, the question arises whether this is Russian state policy.

- **Georgia's next Parliament will be much less unbalanced than the present one.**

Even if Saakashvili appears likely to secure re-election, the upcoming Parliamentary vote – which even pro-government pollsters suggest two thirds of the public want to be held in April 2008 – will give way to a much more contested political scene in Georgia. The ruling party's position in the next Parliament will almost certainly be reduced. This provides a chance that the fallout of the crisis will strengthen the Georgian democratization process by building into the political process the dialogue that has been notably lacking. Georgia's leaders, on both sides of the divide, have an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and realize the need for constructive policy debate in order to gain legitimacy and support from the public.

A more diversified composition in Parliament, which may in turn boost the role of the Parliament in channeling a more diverse spectrum of political views, would increase the capability of Georgian society to address societal conflicts and divisions through the Parliamentary process, rather than from the street. Representation for a larger proportion of the opposition in Parliament could help these parties develop into mature, responsible and constructive political actors, able to form credible alternatives in Georgian politics. But such a prospect nevertheless poses challenges, as it will require all sides – and especially the Government, with the added burden of incumbency – to step up to their democratic commitments.

Authors' Note

This Policy Paper is based on successive visits to Georgia by the authors in October and November of 2007. It was informed by discussions and interviews with representatives of the Georgian Government as well as members of the opposition and independent observers on the ground.

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