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REP Roundtable Summary

Georgia: Recovery or Retreat?

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Our Georgia-Free Democrats

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At the beginning of the Rose Revolution the young reformers offered a great deal. Many people supported Mikhail Saakashvili. He pushed through a number of welcome reforms to the political system, to cut down corruption, and to ease legal framework for foreign investors.

After the initial burst of reform, however, Saakashvili made a major miscalculation. In order to streamline the decision-making process and push through changes, he increased the power of the presidency to the detriment of other state institutions. Saakashvili's government was also responsible for miscalculations in its handling of conflict resolution. If Saakashvili had succeeded in signing an agreement on the non-use of force with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would have included a provision on the return of internally displaced peoples (IDPs), it is less likely that we would have seen the cycle of provocations which led to last summer's war.

There is no doubt that the 2008 war was planned and executed by the Russian Federation, which deliberately encouraged provocations by Abkhaz and South Ossetian militias. Nevertheless, war could have been averted through smarter diplomacy, less provocative rhetoric from Tbilisi and direct negotiations with the *de facto* leaderships in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One of the major obstacles to a more nuanced approach to the break-away territories was the centralisation and personalisation of power under Saakashvili. There were some in the government who argued for a more reasonable approach. However, Saakashvili continued to raise hopes of NATO membership and swift reunification of the country which increased mistrust. Even now, however, it is fundamentally important that, regardless of the differences between Saakashvili and the opposition, we continue to stand together in the face of external threats. We must be united against such threats as well as expressing our concerns about the current government and the policies it is pursuing.

The opposition is demanding significant political and legal reforms. Controls on the mass media must be lifted. Currently, the opposition has no access to major TV channels. It is only able to get its message across on Tbilisi-based television stations, which cover less than 5 per cent of the population. While Saakashvili talked of changes when Vice President Joe Biden visited, he has, in fact, further increased his control over the press. The recent appointments at Rustavi TV, for example, are not promising.

One obstacle that opposition parties face in realizing their goals is fundraising. There are many business people who have sympathy for the

opposition parties. Legally they should be able to fund the parties they support. Nonetheless, they are told by the government that, if they give funds to the opposition, they will be punished. Therefore, until a fundamental change is made within the current administration, there is not much hope for opposition parties to participate in the electoral process.

The opposition is seeking to depoliticize the Georgian police force. Currently all operational capabilities of all the law enforcement agencies are concentrated under one minister, who wields vast authority. The police are frequently used to harass members of the opposition. Opposition party members' phones are tapped, they are arrested on spurious charges, such as arms offences.

After the most recent protests this year, 48 people were arrested. Most were charged with drug possession. Some were released on bail soon after. However, some were kept under arrest. This was a deliberate move in order to spark differences between the opposition parties. The government hoped that this calculated step would eventually help to split the opposition parties up and get them on their side. Our goal right now, as opposition, is to keep a unified front in the face of government repression.

The opposition is committed to change within the democratic system. The recent street protests clearly demonstrated the disposition of the public and how Saakashvili is regarded. However, street protests alone will not achieve reform. We don't want simply to change personalities; we want to embed a new system of institutionalised decision-making.

There is no sense in criticising the current government without offering an alternative. Georgian people understand the failings of Saakashvili's government and want change, economic change especially. By engaging the government, we can ultimately change the government. By exposing whether or not they have the capability for change, we can ensure that Saakashvili upholds his commitments to democracy. Foreign powers have been too quick to give support to Georgia without setting clear benchmarks for the Georgian government in terms of democratisation. Saakashvili wants Georgia to be a strong player in the international arena. It is essential that foreign powers use this to engage him and encourage democratisation. We need credible, honest, foreign powers to be vocal concerning Georgia's shortcomings. Criticism of the government does not harm Georgia. We differ sharply with Saakashvili on how he handled the territorial conflicts, but we are committed

to the state, to depoliticising the police force, opening the press, removing government interference in the judicial system.

Our interest is the state. It is necessary to engage with the government, but to be tough on electoral rules. It is important that we work towards a free media, a depoliticized police force and uncorrupted judicial system. The opposition will be able to engage in fair elections in Tbilisi. Georgia will benefit greatly from this; Georgia can and will be a key country in the Caucasus for foreign investment, energy security and regional stability.

Discussion

You mentioned the restraints on media coverage for the opposition. What challenges does the opposition face in developing networks and building a support base outside Tbilisi?

The approach of the government has been the same in the capital and the regions. There is less fear in Tbilisi because there is a freer media, and there are many representatives of the international community, which emboldens people. The regions have almost no autonomy; the regional leadership is appointed from the centre and have little leverage over their budgets. The law on local elections and regional self-government needs to be revisited. The Police and other law-enforcement agencies are used to pressurise the opposition. During election time, financial inducements, or threats, are often deployed to get the vote out. For example, farmers are informed that they will receive new machinery if they vote wisely. But even if they do vote in the 'required' manner, they don't always get what is promised.

How do you assess the US approach to Georgia? Is there a need for tougher messages?

Open western criticism of Saakashvili's government is much needed. The US administration has spoken out strongly in support of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. During US Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Tbilisi he made it clear to the leadership that future bilateral relations depend on democratic reform. But this was done privately only. And therefore the spin which the Georgian media put on the visit was that Biden had given his personal support to Saakashvili. It would have been better if Mr Biden had been more open and direct. In July 2008 the then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Saakashvili explicitly that he should not give in to

Russian provocations. If she had stated this publicly, perhaps Saakashvili might have acted differently.

Some in the West may take the view that if they are going to support Georgia as a strategic entity then at least with Saakashvili they have a strong leader who is generally popular and credible. They see him as the right man in a difficult region who is willing to resist Russian pressure. How does one get beyond the fear that lessening support for Saakashvili may undermine the West's strategic interests, especially as there is no obvious candidate to replace him? Is this a dilemma for the West?

The West can be tough on Georgia's territorial integrity, tough on Russia, and also tough with Saakashvili. It is vital for the West to de-personalise its relations with the Georgian state. Georgia has received a great deal of support, one only has to look at the list of donors which provided financial aid after the war in 2008. It is wonderful that there has been such financial support, but Western donors should follow through by imposing obligations on the government to account for the way the money is spent, and check it has been effectively used.

There has been a great deal of debate about the true timeline of events on the eve of the war in August 2008. Saakashvili insists that Russian tanks were passing through the Roki tunnel into Georgia in large numbers, and he was therefore compelled to launch an offensive in South Ossetia. Do you believe this?

The operational assumption during my time as Ambassador to the United Nations was that Russian forces were passing through the Roki Tunnel at the time the Georgian troops moved towards Tsinkhvali. We must be clear on the facts. Russia had huge military presence just over the border from Georgia and had conducted a series of exercises explicitly aimed at preparing for an invasion of Georgian territory. Russia had no right under international law to invade Georgia. It occupied Georgian territory, carried out ethnic cleansing and is still in breach of the agreement reached with the EU. Whatever served as the trigger for the war, Russia was and is in violation of international law.

Georgia had a legitimate right to defend its country. However, the defence was disastrously handled. Under Saakashvili, one and a half billion dollars

was poured into the military in a totally untransparent way. This was classic behaviour by Saakashvili. There was no clear organisation, no institutional control. There was no clear evacuation plan for the villagers living in and around Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Of course, the inflammatory rhetoric on both sides was not helpful. Russia prepared for the war for a long time. The military led Saakashvili to believe that he had a chance of success. Saakashvili miscalculated regarding the US response, and the leverage the US had in the region. He believed one phone call would prevent Russia from intervening. He overestimated the capacity of the Georgian military.

Saakashvili came to power on a wave of popular approval and a big mandate. What went wrong? Why did Saakashvili disappoint those hoping for greater reform?

Saakashvili lacks focus. He is incapable of taking an institutional approach to problem-solving. The country is run by three or four insiders. Over-centralisation has weakened the state.

On what terms would you rejoin the government?

I am not prepared to return. I left after ten years in government because I was not making any impact on Georgian policies. I am willing to contribute as an advisor, especially on matters of foreign relations and conflict resolution, but not as a member of the government.

There are already three people opposing Saakashvili who claim to be good alternative leaders, they're pretty unsavoury characters however. As personalities count a lot in Georgia, are you worried?

Our current objective is to work with the other opposition parties so we can become a more credible force in government. In order to achieve this we are having numerous discussions with other opposition parties. Not everyone is ideal to work with, but we are aiming to increase trust among Georgian society. Our aim is not revolution; we campaign for democratic reform so that we can come to power through elections.

How can Georgia engage with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia?

The best approach is to show how integration into Europe with Georgia can benefit the Abkhazia. Georgia must engage, there is no other way, but without legitimating Abkhazia's self-proclaimed status. However, until Saakashvili goes, there is unlikely to be any progress in this regard. The level of mistrust is too great.

You've spoken about the need for an agreement on the non-resumption of force. Before the war, it was assumed such an agreement would benefit the Abkhaz more than the Georgian side. Now, the situation appears to be reversed. How does this affect the likelihood of an agreement being reached?

It's not true that in the past the agreement was only in the interests of Abkhazia. Such an agreement would have meant an acceptance by the Abkhaz side of the return of all IDPs. The security guarantees which would have been provided were not total, but would have increased trust. If Georgia had openly stated that it would not use force this would have greatly advanced negotiations. Now, if I were in Saakashvili's position now I would happily sign a joint statement that there can be no military option. This would increase Georgia's standing and undermine the Russian position. An agreement should be signed, but now Russia must sign as well. Russia was also a party to the war last year.

What lessons has Moscow drawn from last year's war? How will relations with Russia develop?

Moscow has concluded that it can invade a neighbouring state, violate international law, and get away with it. There have been almost no negative consequences for Russia. Business is going on as usual. Putin believes he can act with impunity within Russia's sphere of influence. This is not just about Georgia, it's about a wider struggle for influence in the region

Why does the opposition not accept that Georgia started the war in August 2008?

I was one of the critics of Saakashvili's conduct of the war. Whatever Saakashvili's actions, there was no justification for Russia's annexation of

Georgian territory. There is clear evidence that Georgian villages were shelled from South Ossetia. Of course, the response was disproportionate. Russia had no legal or moral grounds to act as it did.

Given that Russia regards Georgia as part of its sphere of influence, how do you rate your country's prospects of joining NATO?

The process of integration is very important. Regrettably, after the war, Georgia's NATO aspirations have been put on hold. No one wants to import a conflict with Russia into the Alliance. The reform process which is required for integration and eventual membership is valuable in itself. Integration increases the pace of military reform, transparency and accountability. Russia needs to understand that it can no longer have a sphere of influence. Whether we like it or not, it would be very hard for us to join NATO without more accountability on our part and normalizing relations with Russia.

How should Georgia go about normalizing talks with Russia?

It will be a long and painful process, but it is something that we must do. The most important thing is to open up a direct channel for communication and find areas of common interest on which we can engage together. Perhaps Georgia and Russia should start with regional issues, such as transport or energy cooperation. It is essential that relations improve. It will be a painful process but there is no other way. We cannot secure our future without it.

To what extent will talks between Armenia and Turkey affect Georgia?

It can only benefit Georgia and the wider Caucasus region. The opening of the border between Armenia and Turkey will improve stability in the region. We enjoy good relations with all three countries. Georgia's strategic relevance will remain regardless of developments, and Georgia's strategic partnership with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey will continue. Of course there are occasional irritants. The recent statement of the Armenian President about the status of the Armenian language in Georgia was regrettable, but we will retain good relations.

What is your attitude to Russian investment in Georgia?

This is a difficult issue. Privatisation has often been conducted in a non-transparent way. No one knows who is really buying up assets, we have no access to the documentation. I am not against Russian capital. If the investment is legal and transparent then there should be no barrier to it. Given Georgia's current position, concerns over the influence of Russian business, particularly when it is closely linked to the Russian state, are legitimate.