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## Russia and Eurasia Meeting Summary

# Contrasting Electoral Lessons from Georgia and Belarus

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This is a summary of an event held at Chatham House on 29 January 2013. Irakli Alasania (minister of defence of Georgia) and Andrei Sannikov (deputy foreign minister of Belarus, 1995-1996) discussed electoral politics in Georgia and Belarus.

The 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia led the country to its first democratic change of government and transfer of power. The Rose Revolution started with reforms by President Mikheil Saakashvili but since 2006-07 too much power was concentrated in the president's hands. By 2012 most state institutions were highly politicized, the media was tightly controlled by the government, opposition activists were persecuted by the authorities and the standard of living for many Georgians fell. A profound sense of injustice was felt by the general public. In this political environment, Georgian Dream – a coalition of the opposition parties led by Bidzina Ivanishvili – was able to offer an alternative to the Georgian people and gain their support at the parliamentary elections. The unification of the opposition was key to this success.

The election campaign of Georgian Dream was focused on the future and concentrated around three main issues: agriculture, the justice system and social issues. Furthermore, the coalition stands for free, independent and accessible media and intends to introduce changes into the election legislation. An all-Georgian census is foreseen before the presidential elections in October to eliminate the possibility of rigged results.

Despite numerous differences on domestic policy, Georgian Dream and President Saakashvili's party agree on the issues of Georgia's defence, security and foreign policies, where integration with NATO and the EU is the highest priority. This can be regarded as an example of cohabitation of the two opposing sides in power since October 2012, of their efforts to act as Europeans, to respond to the needs of the general public and to institutionalize democracy.

As for the defence sector, the coalition suggests that in four years Georgia should have a fully professional army. The Ministry of Defence should be depoliticized and it should be transparent and accountable in its activity. Parliamentary oversight should be ensured. Civil society should be encouraged to participate in this process too – for this reason, a special working group was created in the ministry.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's experience in business should help the government to improve the business environment and attract foreign investors. For the development of agriculture, access to the Russian market will play a

significant role. Therefore, establishing a manageable business relationship with Russia is among the government's priorities, alongside Georgia's EU membership aspirations.

When Saakashvili became president in 2004 numerous officials of the Shevardnadze era were arrested. Redistribution of power and property occurred. Georgia's new government is determined to get rid of such practices, if necessary via independent investigation of cases involving members of the president's team.

Saakashvili used an effective public relations machine, funded from public sources, in order to create his image, mainly in the West. The Georgian people, who know the problems the country faces, voted for Georgian Dream in October 2012.

In order to avoid future conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, economic and trade ties should be reinforced. Saakashvili failed to do so and thus was unable to prevent escalation in 2008. Ivanishvili's government is determined to negotiate with people who live in these two regions and take their concerns into consideration.

Changing the justice system is not an easy task, primarily because a hard mindset needs to be overcome. Investigations must be carried out in a transparent manner and public awareness about the process is crucial. Institutional independence of the judicial is of crucial importance.

A political 'Eurasian Union' is President Vladimir Putin's 'irrational' project, which is unlikely to bring gains for Russia. There is no prospect of Georgia engaging in this integration project. It is negotiating its Association Agreement with the EU and has not expressed any indication of proceeding otherwise.

Since independence in 1991 Belarus had been a parliamentary republic for four years until its constitution was changed and the office of the president was created. First presidential elections took place in 1994 and brought victory to Aliaksandr Lukashenka who has now been in power for 19 years. These were free and fair elections, recognized by the Belarusian people and the international community. In 1995 Lukashenka ordered a referendum that resulted in a change of the country's historic national symbols and made Russian the second official language. A year later another referendum was conducted and the parliament lost many of its powers, which were transferred to the president. According to international observers and the Belarusian opposition, no democratic elections have taken place in the country since. Today Belarus is a severe dictatorship. Brutal violence against peaceful protesters in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential elections followed poor

support for Lukashenka at the polls. Supposedly he had failed to get 50 per cent of the vote and a second round should have taken place. Today the situation is no different from 2010. Lobbyists for the regime work hard in the West, while political prisoners remain in jail.

It is important to recognize the international character of the problem, particularly in light of developments in Russia and Ukraine in recent years. Introduction of economic sanctions should be a key mechanism for the EU in its relations with the Lukashenka regime. This should be a consistent policy and double standards must be avoided.

The Belarusian economy used to be better than any of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries. However, dictators do not need reforms; they prefer a model that can be controlled. In the case of Belarus, it is the old Soviet model, with elements of a market economy. This is accepted in the West. Businessmen are still ready to take the risk and invest their money in the Lukashenka system.

Lukashenka enjoys a strong business lobby in Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. This has made economic sanctions by the EU hardly possible since it would result in significant losses for these neighbouring countries while there is no compensation mechanism.

A Georgian scenario of opposition unification is unlikely in Belarus. Pressure and harassment of activists and anyone in opposition occurs on a daily basis.

Labour movements are unlikely to play a major role under the dictatorship – they are treated in the same manner as other public associations by the authorities. The amendments to the labour legislation in 2012 were deemed as a ‘return to slavery’ since they deprive certain categories of workers of the right to terminate their contract once hired by a state company.

In Ukraine and Georgia the democratic opposition was supported partially by local businessmen. This is not the case in Belarus, where all opposition parties and movements are fully funded by the West and therefore are heavily dependent on their donors.