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August 25, 2007

The current article is an attempt to analyze threats and challenges to long term stability in Georgia since the Rose Revolution in November 2003, which brought a group of young, energetic and western minded politicians under the leadership of president Saakashvili to power. Focus is made on contradictions in foreign and domestic policy goals and priorities of the new Georgian leadership in the geopolitical environment which has undergone significant changes since 2003.

Foreign and Domestic Policy Priorities as Promised by President Saakashvili

President Saakashvili came to power on the wave of aspirations for changes in domestic policy expressed by the majority of the Georgian population. With regard to foreign policy, under President Shevardnadze the spirit of the Georgian population has not diverged with the official western orientation of the country. Indeed President Shevardnadze expressed the will of the Georgian population when he officially applied for Georgia's membership to NATO in 2002. Thus the Georgian population demanded the new political leadership changes in domestic policy and bringing to an end the process of Georgia's integration into NATO initiated by President Shevardnadze in 2002.

In response to the will of the Georgian population President Saakashvili identified the following foreign and domestic goals and priorities for his presidency:

1. Foreign policy: to gain membership for Georgia into Euro-Atlantic structures within his presidency;
2. Domestic policy: restore the territorial integrity of the country; guarantee democratic development through ensuring civil freedoms and equal opportunities to all citizens; eradicate corruption and ensure transparency and accountability of public spending; ensure rapid economic development through attracting FDI;

The new Georgian political leadership has to carry out above mentioned objectives in a new geopolitical environment which has been aggravated significantly by the resurgence of American and Russian rivalry over NATO expansion towards the Caucasus. Russia which emerged as a strong regional power after several years of turmoil, views NATO expansion in the Black and potentially Caspian Sea basins as a threat to its security. The US on the other hand sees NATO forces as the best guarantor of security of multi billion energy and transit projects in the Caspian and the Caucasus. As a result of this clash of interests the old strategic partnerships in the region which had been set up in 1997-2002 are dismissed and new partnerships have yet to be forged.

Indeed, President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia (1995-2003), Heydar Aliev of Azerbaijan (1993-2003) and President Demirel of Turkey (1993-2000) managed to set up a strong strategic partnership which laid solid grounds for implementation of international energy and transit projects. In those years Moldova, Ukraine and Uzbekistan had been close partners to the Caucasian countries within GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova)[1].

Following the Bush administration's new regional policy in the south flank of the FSU area (the Caucasus and Central Asia), and a military operation in Iraq, some established partnerships started falling apart. In March of 2006 following riots in Andijan, Uzbekistan officially withdrew from GUUAM and joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization in December of the same year.

Since the beginning of the military campaign in Iraq Turkey also started drifting towards Russia, and Ukraine has yet to decide which path to take after elections in September 2007. Moldova also oscillates between Russia and the EU. Such is the geopolitical environment where the new Georgian political leadership has to establish new strategic partnerships in order to find a strong internal balance and to carry out its foreign and domestic policy objectives.

Expectations of the Georgian population towards the new revolutionary

leadership have been so high that the failure to deliver results in either of the new leadership's commitments may cause frustration and resentment to the current regime as well as its partners abroad, especially US and EU[2]. Such developments could undermine the democratic process and create grounds for tensions and instability.

Impact of New Geopolitical Rivalries on Georgia

Georgia is still a weak vulnerable country with two unresolved conflicts and big regional ambitions. The first and most important ambition of the new political leadership is to restore the territorial integrity without which a long term stability of the country is unthinkable. If admitted that ethnic conflicts in Georgia are part of larger geopolitical rivalries, then the way these geopolitical rivalries evolve will have a very serious impact on the conflicts resolution and restoration of territorial integrity. A strong strategic partnership with the US provides grounds for the new political leadership of Georgia to hope that the issue of territorial integrity can be solved within President Saakashvili's, if not first, then at least second term.

Such developments could become realistic if Russia agreed for some reason to give up its interests in the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin in favor of NATO within six years or so (within President Saakashvili's hypothetical second tem). If not, the current tensions between the US lead NATO and Russia would grow and turn the whole region into a hostage of geopolitical rivalries. This would undermine the democratic process in Georgia and provide grounds for the establishment of an authoritarian or semi authoritarian regime with a strong military component.

NATO Expansion towards the East versus Russia

As it has been mentioned above President Saakashvili's main foreign policy objective is to achieve Georgia's integration into trans-Atlantic structures and NATO. It is widely believed throughout the current Georgian leadership that membership to NATO is the best way for Georgia to protect itself against Russia, and finally and irrevocably embark on the way of democratic development. This is the only issue on which there is a consensus among the ruling elite, the opposition and the society.
Obviously Georgia's accession to NATO is not subject just to Georgia's will

to accede to this organization. Many NATO member countries view the accession of the Caucasus countries to this organization as a means to ensuring long term stability in the region and protection for multi billion energy infrastructure projects transiting the Caucasus. The NATO lead anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and the anti-terrorist coalition military operation in Iraq as well as tensions between Iran and the west on the subject of Iran's nuclear program make NATO expansion towards the east almost inevitable. The Bush administration's new Middle East policy is the main driving force behind such developments.

The further expansion of NATO toward the eastern Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian would normally mean the emergence of NATO forces on the Black and Caspian seas which looks quite unrelaistic under current circumstances. There are two blockages on this way:

- The legal status of the Black Sea. Navigation on the Black Sea is regulated by the Montreaux convention of 1936 which restricts the access of military vessels of non Black sea basin countries into the sea. The convention allows for access of military vessels of non Black sea countries for a limited time with serious restrictions on deadweight.

- The legal status of the Caspian Sea. The Caspian littoral countries have been discussing the issues of the status of the Caspian since the demise of the Soviet Union with no tangible results so far. At least Azerbaijan should become a NATO member for NATO forces to emerge in the Caspian Sea in the future.

Obviously provisions of the Montreaux convention are desperately outdated and fail to reflect new realities like new Black Sea countries which emerged as a result of the demise of the Soviet Union- Georgia and Ukraine. It is clear for all parties interested and involved that a new regulatory document is necessary. However, Russia and Turkey view the revision of the convention as a serious blow to their national interest and security. Indeed, Russia is reluctant to admit that military vessels from the main NATO countries such as the US, Britain, Italy and others could

acquire unrestricted access to the Black Sea as a result of a revision of the current regulation.

Turkey's concern about the security of Istanbul, which is divided by the straits in two parts, in case these straits fall under new international regulation is understandable. In addition, as Turkey views it, the emergence of an independent Kurdish state as a result of the potential disintegration of Iraq could create an imminent threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. These concerns make Turkey, a long date NATO member country, a close ally of Russia on the Black Sea status issue.

Russia and Turkey have objected to the expansion of NATO Active Endeavor operation in the Mediterranean into the Black Sea in 2004, and block the revision of the Montreaux convention. Further developments in this regard will depend on the outcome of the September elections in Ukraine. If the new Ukrainian leadership lines up with Russia and Turkey, the existing access restrictions of non Black Sea countries' military forces to the Black Sea will probably be retained in some form in the new regulatory document. This means that the task of protection of the important transit routes crossing the Caspian and Black Seas will remain with the regional NATO members (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, potentially Azerbaijan and Georgia) and the Russia lead Collective Security Treaty member countries(all Central Asian countries excluding Turkmenistan). Russia as the founder of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and a member of NATO/Russia Council may consider itself a link between NATO and CSTO.

Proceeding from the above, there are two potential outcomes for NATO expansion towards the Caucasus and the accession of Georgia. In the first scenario the US driven NATO manages to overcome the opposition of Russia and Turkey (with Ukraine it will be clear after the election) on the Black Sea, and Russia and Central Asian countries on the Caspian Sea. In the case of the Black Sea the US with its partners within NATO achieve changing the Black Sea regulation the way to allow the presence of military forces from non Black Sea NATO member countries. In the case of the Caspian Sea the US and its partners in NATO achieve adoption of a new status for the Caspian which would allow the presence of non Caspian countries military forces on the Caspian Sea.

Otherwise the regional Black Sea basin NATO countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia and Russia on the Black Sea) and, Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization member countries of Central Asia shall have to ensure security of the major energy transit projects as well as long term stability through Blackseafor and/or Black Sea Harmony, Caspianfor and/or Caspian Guard or any other regional security organization with Russia having the leading role in it.

In both cases Georgia's (and Azerbaijan's) accession to NATO seems inevitable; the question is whether they will accede within their internationally recognized borders or within their current factual borders.

Challenges to Georgia's Long Term Stability

I. Georgia's Potential Membership to NATO and Territorial Integrity

As the new Georgian political leadership views it the membership to NATO would protect Georgia against Russia and ensure long term stability and security of the country. Many ordinary Georgians as well as politicians view a future NATO membership as an instrument for restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. While others recognize that NATO would not allow itself to be involved in internal conflict settlement and consider the possibility of Georgia's accession into this organization within its factual borders. They think after accession to NATO Georgia will be better positioned to discuss conflict settlement with Russia. It should also be mentioned that NATO officials on visit to Georgia have never given any sign that such interconnection exists between these two priorities that hold such importance for the country's foreign and domestic policy (NATO membership and territorial integrity).

Taking into consideration Russia's severe opposition towards the expansion of NATO into the Caucasus, fully supported by the leadership of break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (and Nagorno Karabakh of Azerbaijan), it is difficult to imagine Georgia (and Azerbaijan) joining NATO within internationally recognized borders at least within President Saakashvili's first and second term. Partners within NATO the US and EU reiterated many times that they are definitely against a military

settlement of the conflict. Then would NATO members admit Georgia (and Azerbaijan) within their factual borders? In Georgia there is no political group which would officially and in the open consider such a possibility.

Guided by the will to achieve Georgian accession to NATO within President Saakashivli's presidency the current Georgian leadership is directing the country's scarce financial resources towards bringing the defense closer to NATO standards. Georgia's defense budget makes up 1 billion GEL, one fourth of Georgia's state budget, representing 7% of GDP, the second largest worldwide after Israel. However, some of the government's efforts to bring the defense closer to NATO standards do not always comply with those standards, for example compulsory military and reserve service[3], and a wide and costly NATO advertisement campaign[4]. In a poor country where about 70% of the population already supports Georgia's integration into NATO, such costly advertisement campaigns cannot be viewed otherwise than as an excessive luxury.

Furthermore, the Georgian government does not pay due attention to the implementation of other standards the NATO member countries practice, such as transparency of public spending and civilian control over the military. For example this year less than half of the defense budget spending, or 450 million GEL, escaped public control. Furthermore the major problem in the defense building and spending in Georgia is that the whole process is under control of a very small political group.

This group of young politicians views the defense sector as their personal domain and do not deem it necessary to comply with requirements of transparency of spending and accountability. Even representatives of the opposition parties let alone civil society groups have been refused to participate in the parliamentary commission which is in charge of assuming control of military and defense spending[5]. Unofficially the Georgian leadership justifies such secrecy around the defense spending by the need to restore territorial integrity.

If the current geopolitical picture of the region changed and Georgia joined NATO within its internationally recognized borders the Georgian military would occur under compulsory public control which would eliminate all

grounds of concern for transparency of spending and civilian control. If Georgia failed to carry out its peace plans for breakaway regions, and joined NATO within its factual borders, the defense spending would remain opaque (justified by the necessity to fund covert operations meant for the restoration of territorial integrity) and create grounds for tensions on borders and domestically among various political and social groups. Based on current internal developments in Georgia[6], there are reasons to fear that if Georgia failed to join NATO at all, which could be considered also as a possibility, instead of a democratic country Georgia would evolve into an authoritarian regime with a strong military component.

Proceeding from the abovementioned the long term stability and security of Georgia depends on how relations between the US lead NATO and Russia will evolve towards cooperation on the Black and Caspian Seas or further tensions and military confrontation. Accordingly, with growing tensions between Russia and the US the current Georgian regime could evolve into a strong authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule.

II. Contradictions of Georgia's Domestic Policy

Brief summery of the reforms environment : After tree years of rule and approaching the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2008 the new political leadership has achieved considerable success in reforming the country as it is recognized by partners in the US, EU, IMF and WB which awarded the title of best reform leader to Georgian Prime-Minister Nogaideli. Indeed it is difficult not to agree with their positive assessment in the following: economic growth is maintained for two consecutive years, the energy crisis severing the country under President Shevardnadze is definitely overcome, and success in defense and police building is obvious. But all these achievements have been made at the expenses of civic and property rights and democratic process in the country.

In 2004, immediately after the elections, the new political leadership initiated changes to the Georgian constitution through which the president acquired larger powers in detriment of other branches of power the parliament and judiciary. Although the Georgian judiciary (except the Prosecutor's Office) had undergone reforms under Saakashvili as Minister

of Justice, the first step of the new leadership towards reforming the judiciary was firing the old judges[7] and appointment of new inexperienced young people instead. It is to be mentioned that the majority of fired judges had undergone all kinds of training in the country and abroad, and had acquired significant knowledge as well as work experience. Furthermore, they were selected through a thorough selection procedure before their appointment to various instance courts.

In parallel to the new attempt to reform the judiciary the new political leadership sanctioned another initiative, which consisted in expropriation of property of former political elite and close to it financial groups. During less than a year almost all large and medium businesses in Georgia changed completely or partially the ownership in favor of the new political elite and close to it new business and financial groups. Assets were transferred through arrests, intimidation and blackmail and accompanied by live reports on TV until the owners ceded to the pressure. Those who refused to cede remain in jail like David Mirtskulava, the former energy minister of Georgia.

In private discussions representatives of the new political leadership justified such draconian measures by the need to eradicate any potential attempt of counter-revolution (by pro-Russian forces as they consider themselves as pro-western forces). By the end of 2004 both the power and large and medium size (for Georgia's scale) property was concentrated in the hands of the new political leadership and the government proceeded to painful institutional, educational and social reforms. At first new people were appointed everywhere in state institutions including the ministries. Appointments were discriminatory (against political stand and age) made on the basis of loyalty to the ruling party and age, people older than 35 were fired without regard to their skills and experience. For some ministers, deputy ministers and heads of departments these positions were the first jobs in their life as they had come directly from universities. These young ministers with their deputies and heads of departments moved around the cabinet of ministers trying several ministerial positions one after another until the US and EU intervened and strongly recommended against frequent changes in the ministries and their staff.

Institutional reforms, reforms in educational and social systems have left people above 35 without jobs taking no regard to their skills and experience. Forceful reforms have been accompanied by repeated crackdowns on the digital and printed media[8]. During the summer of 2007 the majority of printed media were evicted from their offices as a result of cancellations of their lease contracts.

The first sign that all is not going right with the Georgian reforms was given by the US State Department Report of 2006 on the progress of democracy in Georgia. The report outlined shortcomings in the functioning of the judiciary (referring to the Georgian judiciary as "the phone" and "selective judiciary") and flagrant violations of civil and property rights. Transparency International, a trustworthy international organization, points out in its report of November 2006 that "Georgia has created a super presidential system that the branches of power have not been separated in practice and parliament depends on the good will of the president."

So far, as a result of reforms initiated by the new political leadership since 2003 in Georgia: branches of power are not separated, the judiciary system does not function properly, the media is not free, power and wealth is concentrated into the hands of the ruling political group. This reveals that that the democratic process is undermined in the country and it would evolve into the establishment of a strong authoritarian rule if the current trends were not stalled or reversed.

1. Façade Democracy and Authoritarianism

The new generation of politicians who fought against "the anti-democratic regime of Shevardnadze" displaying their commitment to western values, have significantly changed their stand since they came to power. Many of them esteem (in private discussions) that these western values of democracy are premature for Georgia, they say democracy is a luxury and could be counter-effective for Georgia until the territorial integrity is restored.

This new non official ideology is behind the almost established one party – one person rule, which distorted the balance among different branches

of power, and lead to severe and numerous violations of civil and property rights. The parliament, the government, the judiciary and the media do not exist as independent and balancing branches of power. The majority in the parliament is represented by the Presidential party- the National Movement with parliamentary opposition parties having no impact on the political process in the country.

Furthermore, there is no cooperation, no dialogue between the ruling party on the one hand and the opposition parties and the society on the other hand. Prominent figures of the Georgian society have addressed open letters to the president on number of issues which raised serious concerns among the Georgian society to which the president did not respond. The ruling elite esteem the Georgian society too backward to be a partner in the reforms; rather it is viewed as an object of reforms.

2. Flagrant Violations of Civil and Property Rights[9]

No independent judiciary and media and zero tolerance to crime-The fact that there is no independent judiciary and media in Georgia makes it impossible for ordinary citizens and legal persons to have fair trial and defend their cases in the court. The General Prosecutor's office has become so powerful that judges (young and inexperienced for the most part) do not even try to object to its pressure and produce indictments as demanded by the prosecutor in the trial. Almost all claims submitted by prosecutors to the court have been met by judges with just one exception. In May 2007 the former head of the Defense Academy after several months of trial was found not guilty and set free from the court hall[10]. In thousands of other cases citizens have been arrested and put to prison even for minor infractions based on the official policy of zero tolerance to crime. As a result of the "zero tolerance to crime" policy Georgian prisons have been so overcrowded (designed to accommodate 7000 prisoners shelter about 18 thousand convicts) that unbearable living conditions there have lead to a very high mortality rate.

In a poor and socially vulnerable country like Georgia, where officially about 54% of the population lives below the poverty line, small infringements are more the result of economic hardships rather than crime. However, the

current zero tolerance policy leads to further marginalization of already deprived groups of the society. Arrests of citizens for various reasons have been accompanied by cameras and reported on TV news online in the infringement of the fundamental civil right of innocence until proven otherwise.

Property rights violations

Most violations of citizens' rights are related to violations of property rights. Expropriation of property of the collaborators of president Shevardanadze has been an official policy of the revolutionary political leadership. One prominent member of the Parliament Defense and Security Committee stated in a semi private discussion that the goal of the policy of depriving the former political elite of their property was to eradicate any attempt of counter-revolution (by pro-Russian forces).

At that time many companies changed ownership. Members of the former elite were arrested and urged to register their property in the name of the people indicated. Thus the new political elite substituted the old elite through vague procedure arrangements where the owner recognized himself guilty in all charges and voluntarily ceded his property.

When the property of the old political elite was expropriated, ordinary middle class (not actively involved in politics) which had managed to privatize some state property during the first and second phase of privatization between 1992-2002 came next. Parcels of agricultural lands in rural areas as well as small plots of lands in Tbilisi and seaside Achara came under threat. People had already started construction works or growing crops on parcels they thought belonged to them, when during spring 2007 the Tbilisi Mayor's office annulated its own ruling, which had regulated the privatization of small plots of land by citizens in 1992-2002, annulling thousands of property rights. The public outrage against this decision was so high that the Mayor's office had to cancel its own ruling of spring 2007 regarding property. Later on in the summer of 2007 the parliament adopted a law which recognized as lawful privatization of properties in 1992-2002 except for those cases where legal procedures had already been started by the law enforcement authorities.

On August 14 2007 the Parliament of Georgia published the list of privatization cases against which legal procedures had already started. The list was published on the Georgian Parliament's website. This is a 400 page document according to which almost 7000 ownership rights have been suspended on the best placed parcels of land in nearby Tbilsi, Batumi and other prestigious areas.

Since there is no independent judiciary citizens fail to defend themselves against the aggressive re-privatization campaign launched by the government (privatization and re privatization is instrumental for the change of ownership and at the same time it is the source of budget revenues). The majority of property right violation cases after having undergone all internal procedures through all courts in Georgia (which failed to defend ownership rights) have been submitted to the Court of Justice in Strasbourg for revision.

3. Leftist Populist Rhetoric and Extreme Right Decisions

President Saakashvili's ability to talk to people in their own language has never been questioned. His rhetoric is always very energetic, enthusiastic and leftist by all means. However, all decisions adopted by his government are extreme rightist in favor of big business and totally ignoring the interests of small businesses and employees. The new labor code and the revised tax code are a good example of such a policy. According to the new tax code all tax burden is shifted to the employee's shoulder's who have to pay 25% of income (12%) and social tax (13%) instead of just 12% of income tax in the previous version of the tax code. In Georgia average salaries and pensions are already behind the living standards, a 25% tax is therefore very high for low income families[11].

The state has liberated itself from the bulk of social responsibilities and placed it on the shoulders of employees. There is very limited state funding for higher education, medical and social services. The only sector to which the state funding is flowing excessively is the defense and the police building.

4. Pro-Western Rhetoric / Russian Investments

President Saakashvili's major foreign policy priority is Georgia's rapid integration into Trans-Atlantic structures. There is even a ministry governing Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO, the Georgian people fully support the government's efforts in this regard. On the economic side of the matter the situation is quite different.

The new Georgian government launched an overall privatization of remaining public enterprises in 2004. The first phase of privatization started in summer 2004 when the Georgian government invited a large group of representatives of Russian business and ruling elite on a special business conference to Georgia, and offered a list of major Georgian state owned companies, including strategic enterprises like ports, railway and main gas pipeline grid for bid. According to the main strategy of the government governing the privatization process, preference is given not to development projects (as normally it would have been expected) but to the amount of money offered without regard to the skills and experience of the bidder and the origin of the money. The government was not concerned that unknown companies with non transparent or unknown financial sources could bring mafia practices into the country.

At that time the Georgian society and expert groups found privatization of strategic enterprises to mainly Russian state owned companies very dangerous for long term stability and Georgia's aspirations to NATO and EU membership. They thought that business and financial groups which would acquire Georgian companies, invest money and make profit would be able to define the political life and foreign policy orientation of the country in the long run.

In 2004 due to pressure from civil society and expert groups Georgia's ports, railways and main gas pipelines remained under public ownership. However other enterprises, such as; Tbilisi Gas Distribution Company, Rustavi Chemicals Plant Azot, Chiatura Manganese and Zestaphoni Ferroalloys were purchased by mainly public companies from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. During the new phase of privatization which started in late 2006 all state owned enterprises including ports and railway

have been privatized and again assets were purchased by the Russian-Georgian business groups registered in off-shore areas. Up to August 2007 only the main gas pipeline grid of Georgia has escaped repeated attempts of privatization by Russian gas giant Gasprom.

What makes Russia-Georgia relations so strange is that on the official level the political leadership uses very aggressive rhetoric against each other, on the business side their companies cooperate closely. Although Russia is not officially the largest investor in Georgia, experts estimate that investments coming from offshore areas such as London, Cyprus, Bahamas, Switzerland and even from Austria, belong to Georgian–Russian business groups operating in Russia. As it is well known almost all businesses in Russia are linked with the ruling political elite and politics. Will these groups limit their activities in Georgia to business or will they be involved in politics? Many experts think this is just a matter of time before they get involved in politics.

As a result of the transfer of assets (otherwise expropriation of property) in 2004, all large and medium size businesses have come under control of the new political elite and affiliated business groups. Other businesses are really small, and there is a very small middle class in Georgia with limited financial resources. Thus there are limited financial resources available internally for opposition parties to strengthen and develop. How could a democratic political process proceed in a country where all medium and large businesses belong to the ruling elite or to non resident business groups whose interests are limited to maximizing their profits?

And most importantly, where will the money needed to support and facilitate a democratic process, elections and legitimate change of power come from? Many Georgian experts believe that whoever invests in the Georgian economy will define the country's medium and long term domestic and foreign policy priorities. If the current trends go on and Russian-Georgian business groups (having their main businesses in Russia) remain the main investors, they will with time also be in a position to participate in defining Georgia's foreign and domestic policy priorities. Given Russia's current position on the issue of NATO expansion

towards the Caucasus, there are doubts that these business groups will favor Georgia's accession to NATO. It could be that in the future Georgia's main foreign policy priority could come in conflict with the interests of the major business groups linked to Russia.

5. Distrust towards the Political Process Counterbalanced by Increasing Importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church

Despite the growing dissatisfaction with the current reforms, the approval rating of the opposition parties does not grow as fast as it could have been expected. People do not respond to the call of different opposition groups to protest openly against violations of civil and property rights, high tariffs on energy, high taxes etc. It looks likely that people have been disillusioned by the political process in general and reject any attempt to get involved in it again.

The only institution which retained the trust of the Georgian society is the Orthodox Church. Indeed, the Georgian Orthodox church has resurged as a powerful institution since the demise of the Soviet Union and has become a real home for the Georgian society since the revolution in 2003. The current leadership's complete neglect and disregard towards the Georgian society contributed to increasing the significance of the church. It is generally observed worldwide that in countries where the democratic political process is oppressed, religious institutions substitute opposition parties to express legitimate rights and aspirations of the population.

Georgia adopted Orthodox Christianity as a state religion in 337 AD. Since then the Orthodox Church has played a very important role in the state building, and social and cultural life of the nation. During invasions by Arabs, Persians, Mongols and Turks the Orthodox Church remained the main source for survival of the Georgian nation and became the symbol of national identity. Under Soviet rule the communist leadership's attempt to discredit the Orthodox Church and substitute it by the idea of communism in Georgia failed. Immediately after the demise of the SU the Orthodox Church resurged as a leading force of the political, cultural and social life of the Georgian nation. Under President Saakashvili the trust of the Georgian population towards the Orthodox Church has grown and it became the

most trusted institution leaving the judiciary, other national institutions, and political groups far behind.

The growing importance of the Orthodox Church can be observed not only through increasing church attendance, but also through the number of new Churches constructed or under construction[12]. The Orthodox clergy has become the most trusted adviser of Georgian families, and a facilitator of dialogue among different social and cultural groups in the country. Until today any open involvement of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the political process has not been observed, however the Church could change its stand if it found that fundamental Georgian national values were endangered. The Orthodox Church could have a stong impact on the internal development, especially on the outcome of the elections if it decided to intervene in the process.

Conclusion

Proceeding from the above-described changes in the geopolitical environment as well as the current Georgian political leadership's contradictory and ill balanced domestic policy any unexpected political, economic or social factors could break the illusory short term stability in the country on the eve of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008. President Saakashvili's political team urgently needs a success story on either Georgia's Trans-Atlantic integration or conflict settlement issue in order to overshadow obvious failures in domestic policy and remain in power for another term.

The current political leadership's failure to deliver such a success story before elections against the backgrounds of the oppression of democratic process in the country would lead to further strengthening of the current one party rule system or to a new revolution. Neither of these potential outcomes would contribute to long term stability in Georgia as well as within the Caucasus as a whole.

The current Georgian leadership should be strongly advised to let the rule of law and open democratic processes govern upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in Georgia.

Endnotes

1 GUUAM was set up as a counter-balance to Russia dominated CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States)

2 The support of the Bush Administration to the current Georgian leadership is so overwhelming that the population assign all successes as well as failures of the government to the US policy

3 NATO countries do not practice compulsory reserve service (L.J.)

4 Some Georgian experts consider NATO advertisement campaign as a pre-election campaign of the ruling party

5 D. Gamkrelidze, leader of the New Rights opposition party and an official candidate for presidential elections was refused to participate in the commission (L.J.)

6 Internal developments in Georgia will be discussed further (L.J.)

7 The case of illegitimate dismissal of judges of the supreme court Gvenatadze, Sulakvelidze and Turava is submitted to Strasburg court of justice for revision

8 Private TV channels : Omega stopped broadcasting in 2004, TV 202 - in 2005 and TV Caucasus cancelled broadcasting in summer 2007 when its lease agreement was annulated.

9 The Public Defender of Georgia's reports of 2005, 06 and first half of 07; and Georgian Young Layers Associations files

10 General Thavdgiridze was jailed based on accusations advanced by the former minister of defense. Since the minister himself is not in favor any more, it was not important whether accusations would be maintained or dropped (I. J.)

11 Average salary in Georgia is around 235 GEL or $140

12 New churches in Georgia have been built on contributions made by poor members of the parish as well as wealthy Georgian's living abroad, especially in Russia (Liana J.)

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About the author

Ms. L. Jervalidze is a researcher and analyst on the Caspian area energy policy, transit routes and regional studies. Currently Ms. Jervalidze has been working as an energy expert in a BP project developed by The Transparency International in Georgia. Her most recent international experience (January-April 2006) was related with the EU energy policy and the role of renewable energy sources in the reduction of emissions and climate change at the Eurasia Centre, Business School of Reading University, UK. Ms. Jervalidze has worked for GEPLAC (Georgian European Policy and Law Advice Centre), and in June 2007 finalized a policy paper - "Advice on Georgia's Policy on Renewable Sources of Energy" (EU Project).

She has made presentations on political and economic aspects of regional energy policy and transit routes to a number of international and regional conferences held in Tbilisi, Baku, Brussels, London and Washington. She is the author of analytical articles published in Georgian and English languages. In 2004-2007 she made regular presentations at the British Embassy updating the embassy on the subject of the most recent energy related regional developments.

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