

Oil intrigue and US Realpolitik heighten tensions in the Caucasus

Georgia's "rose revolution": a made-in-America coup

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The United States has followed its successful regime change in the strategic Caucasian nation of Georgia with a series of moves aimed at pressing its advantage over its major rival in the region, Russia.

On December 2, nine days after Eduard Shevardnadze resigned as president of the former Soviet republic, his US-backed successors joined with the American secretary of state, Colin Powell, to publicly criticize Russia and demand that it remove its troops from Georgia and another former Soviet territory, Moldova. The open conflict between Washington and Moscow occurred at the annual summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), held in the Dutch city of Maastricht.

The American delegation and others persuaded Moldova's president to reject a Russian plan to station Russian troops in a breakaway region of Moldova until 2020. Powell went on to call on Russia to withdraw its troops from Georgia, and warned Moscow against supporting separatist leaders in several rebellious regions within Russia's Caucasian neighbor to the south.

Georgia's interim president, the former parliamentary speaker, Nino Burdzhaniadze, came out of a meeting with Russia's foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, and denounced the Russian leader, complaining that Moscow was "not ready to start new relations with Georgia."

Washington's aggressive stand toward Moscow coincided with the announcement that US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld would visit the Georgian capital of Tbilisi on December 5. Rumsfeld's visit is more than a show of US support for Georgia's new rulers. It follows rumblings about possible military confrontations between the new regime in Tbilisi and the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Osetia in the north, and Adjara in the south.

Last week, Russian president Vladimir Putin hosted talks with the leaders of the three provinces in Moscow, and Aslan Abashidze of Adjara said he was counting on Russian troops based in the Black Sea port of Batumi to repel any aggressive actions from Tbilisi. Abashidze has refused to recognize the new regime, closed Adjara's borders with the rest of Georgia, and threatened to boycott Georgian parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for January 4. These elections will be little more than a formality, as the US-backed forces that seized power over the weekend of November 22-23 have coalesced around the current mayor of Tbilisi and most prominent leader of the insurgency, Mikhail Saakashvili.

Earlier in the week, President George Bush telephoned acting Georgian president Burdzhaniadze and promised to intervene, if necessary, to uphold Georgia's "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity," in the words of a US National Security Council spokesman. Thus, Rumsfeld's visit has the character of a blunt warning to Russia and suggests a strengthening of the American military presence in Georgia.

A focus of great power intrigue

The US-backed coup in Georgia and Washington's subsequent diplomatic saber-rattling have nothing to do with the spread of democracy or similar clichés. Georgia, strategically situated between the Black Sea and the oil-rich Caspian, has long been a focus of intrigue and conflict between the great powers. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the goal of weakening Russian influence and achieving US domination of Georgia and the rest of the Caucasus became a central preoccupation of US imperialist policy.

From the early days of the Clinton administration, Washington invested enormous political and diplomatic capital in the construction of a pipeline that would connect the oil fields of Baku, in Azerbaijan, to Western markets, while skirting the territory of both Russia and Iran. This made Georgia all the more critical, since such a pipeline would have to run through that volatile, backward and ethnically torn country.

The pipeline—running from Baku to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan—is slated to open in 2005. For Washington, the maintenance of relative stability in a Georgia run by an unambiguously pro-US regime is a matter of the greatest urgency. The interests of US energy giants and the global military and the strategic aims of American imperialism as a whole converge on this question. Herein lie the roots of the so-called "rose revolution" that toppled Shevardnadze last month.

Rumsfeld is only the most high-profile of scores of US State Department, Justice Department, Treasury and Pentagon officials who are flowing into Georgia in the aftermath of the coup. Delegations are also on their way from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other international financial institutions.

The representatives of international capital and the US government are secure in the knowledge that they will meet with a friendly response. The forces that collaborated in the campaign of demonstrations and protests that ultimately forced out Shevardnadze are squarely in the camp of Washington, and enthusiastically embrace the "free market" economic policies promoted by the Bush administration and Wall Street.

The made-in-America pedigree of these "democrats" and "revolutionaries" goes further than mere political and ideological affinities. The leading groups and individuals involved in the drive to unseat Shevardnadze were financed by US government-linked institutions, and given training by these and other Western sponsors on how to mount "revolutions" like the ouster of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic.

Latter day "democrats"

The three most prominent political figures in the new ruling clique—Mikhail Saakashvili, Nino Burdzhnashvili and Zurab Zhvania—are all former members of Shevardnadze's inner circle. Their revulsion against the corruption and high-handed intrigue that characterized the former leader's rule is of recent vintage, as is their passion for democracy.

Mikhail Saakashvili, the heir apparent to the Georgian presidency, is a 35-year-old graduate of George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and Columbia University Law School in New York. As Shevardnadze's minister of justice, he oversaw a purge of Soviet-era judges in the mid-1990s—a drive that was reportedly coordinated by the US Embassy in Tbilisi and assisted by the American Bar Association.

In recent months, Saakashvili distanced himself from his former political mentor. In local elections last summer, he ran as an oppositionist and was elected mayor of Tbilisi.

Nino Burdzhnashvili, the 50-year-old speaker of the parliament, broke with Shevardnadze last August over the departure from Georgia of the US-based energy giant AES Corp. The American firm sold its operations in the country to a Russian state energy company at a substantial loss.

Zurab Zhvania is a former ecology activist who was coordinator of Shevardnadze's mid-1990s "reform" team.

Saakashvili placed himself at the head of protests that were launched following parliamentary elections held last November 2. The official results, which recorded a victory for Shevardnadze, were widely seen to be fraudulent. (There seems little doubt that the regime resorted to vote-rigging and ballot-stuffing, but the public perception of a stolen election was enhanced by exit polls showing a victory for the opposition parties. These polls were funded by US agencies and American-backed nongovernmental organizations; they were broadcast on Rustavi 2 TV, a Western-backed oppositional media outlet.)

When Shevardnadze attempted to open the new parliament on November 22, he was met by a demonstration of tens of thousands outside the parliament building demanding a recount of the vote. Saakashvili headed a crowd of several thousand students, organized under the slogan "Kmara," or "Enough," who forced their way into the parliament building and compelled Shevardnadze to make an undignified exit. Saakashvili, brandishing a rose to symbolize the peaceful character of the overthrow, pronounced the Shevardnadze regime dead.

The following day, supporters of the opposition took over the State Chancellery. Burdzhnashvili declared herself acting president and announced new parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in 45 days.

Shevardnadze reportedly called on the military to put down the rebellion, but was rebuffed by the minister of defense. At this point, the Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, traveled to Tbilisi in an attempt to broker a compromise that would leave Shevardnadze in power. When the opposition leaders rejected this proposal, Ivanov prevailed on Shevardnadze to step down, so as to avoid civil warfare. The 12-year president complied on the evening of Sunday, November 23.

Washington pulls the plug

The overriding factor in Shevardnadze's fall was Washington's withdrawal of support for its long-time crony. Relations between the Georgian president and the US had cooled over the previous several years. Russia's financial collapse in 1998 had fueled concerns in Washington over the ability of Shevardnadze to insure stability in Georgia, whose economy remains highly dependent on its huge neighbor to the north. US backing for Shevardnadze eroded further following the installation of the Bush administration.

The US stepped up its unofficial—but unconcealed—support for the so-called democratic opposition, and Shevardnadze responded by tacking toward Moscow.

Washington's initial response to the disputed November 2 parliamentary election was low-key. Following the vote, the State Department described reports of significant irregularities as an "overstatement." But by November 21, the US was signaling a shift in its position, declaring that it was "deeply disappointed" with the conduct of the election.

This was a green light for the opposition forces to go on the offensive. During the weekend of November 22-23, Colin Powell had two telephone conversations with Shevardnadze in which he all but ordered the president to resign. Once Saakashvili and company had seized power, Washington wasted no time in welcoming the new regime, declaring its support, and warning the Russians against any attempt to intervene.

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Bush administration officials have not bothered to conceal their delight over the outcome in Georgia. Said one American diplomat: "This is a textbook case of how to do things right."

American officials know better than most. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported on November 24: "The three politicians [Saakashvili, Burdzhnashvili and Zhvania] are backed by a raft of nongovernmental organizations that have sprung up since the fall of the Soviet Union. Many of the NGOs have been supported by American and other Western foundations, spawning a class of young, English-speaking intellectuals hungry for pro-Western reforms."

Chief among these NGOs is the Liberty Institute, which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development's Eurasia Foundation as well as financier George Soros's Open Society Institute. The Liberty Institute's 31-year-old co-founder, Giga Bokeria, took a Soros Foundation-funded tour last February of Serbia to learn how the Otpor, or "Resistance," student opposition had ousted Milosevic following a disputed election in the autumn of 2000.

In the summer of this year, Otpor activists visited Georgia, running courses that trained 1,000 students from all over the country in the tactics of Serbian-style "revolution." The result was the student group "Kmara," which only months later would provide the manpower for Saakashvili's successful putsch of November 22-23.

Another US government outfit involved in the ouster of Shevardnadze is the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a center of international intrigue and subversion set up under the Reagan administration and relying heavily on the services of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. The Democratic Party wing of the NED, known as the National Democratic Institute, in the words of *Wall Street Journal* columnist George Melloan, "helped introduce Mr. Saakashvili to the methods insurgents in Serbia used to depose dictator Slobodan Milosevic."

Saakashvili has been shameless in proclaiming his fealty to Washington. Verbally throwing himself at Bush's feet, the soon-to-be Georgian president published a column in the December 2 *Financial Times* that began by extolling Bush's November 19 speech in London and its "commitment 'to the global expansion of democracy...'" This obeisance was followed by the claim (minus any suggestion of irony) that the "rose revolution" was about "our right as a nation to determine our own path..."

Saakashvili got down to business further on in the column, announcing his support for "a real market economy" and hailing the oil pipeline "from Baku in Azerbaijan via Tbilisi to the Turkish port of Ceyhan" as "nothing less than a revival of the old Silk Road."

Washington's double standard

Some commentators outside of the US have pointed out the hypocrisy of Washington's democratic pretensions in the Caucasus. The *Financial Times* on November 27 carried an article noting the contradiction between the Bush administration's condemnation of the Georgian parliamentary elections and its withdrawal of support for Shevardnadze, on the one hand, and its silence on the no less fraudulent election held only days earlier in the neighboring Caucasian nation of Azerbaijan, on the other hand.

Wrote the *Financial Times*, "Yet in Azerbaijan the Bush administration ignored the outcry of independent monitors and backed the founding of the first post-Soviet dynasty...quickly congratulating Ilham Aliyev [the son of the outgoing president] as the new president, even as his security forces were arresting the opposition, and after independent observers had criticized the polls."

The difference, the newspaper explained, was "what Washington saw as [Georgia's] tilt toward Russia." Azerbaijan's Aliyev family, by contrast, "was seen as firmly pro-US."

In a sober assessment of US policy, the article went on to say: "Analysts in Washington doubt, however, that US foreign policy is suddenly being guided by higher moral principles. Instead they see events in the Caucasus as another example of clumsily executed US *Realpolitik* being played out across central Asia, where the Bush administration courts autocratic regimes that share an interest combating Islamic militants."

Not only is US policy in the Caucasus predatory, it is reckless in the extreme. The Bush administration is challenging Russian interests in a highly provocative manner, openly working to split away the former Soviet republics from Moscow and virtually surrounding Russia with American military installations. Just last month, the Russian defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, said Moscow would oppose the permanent presence of US military bases in two former Soviet republics—Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—where American forces set up installations in connection with the Afghan war.

At the same time, Washington's aggressive moves threaten to unleash explosive ethnic and religious tensions throughout the Caucasus and beyond.



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