

Georgia: “Rose revolution” destabilises southern Caucasus

Part 1

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The following is the first of a two-part series on the US-backed coup in Georgia and its aftermath. The concluding part will be posted tomorrow, December 30.

Georgia’s so-called “rose revolution,” instigated in Washington and executed in Tbilisi, has not stemmed the country’s malaise. Instead, the usurping of President Eduard Shevardnadze’s regime with one even more firmly orientated towards Washington has intensified the struggle between Russia and the United States to dominate the strategically crucial southern Caucasus region.

The geo-political significance of Georgia cannot be underestimated. It sits astride the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, situated between the Black and Caspian seas, containing two, possibly three breakaway provinces, and borders Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The oil and gas pipelines, shifting Caucasus energy resources away from Russia and Eurasia towards Western markets, must travel more than 1,000 miles through three unstable countries, skirting predominately Kurdish southeast Turkey and passing within 60 miles of Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, which borders Chechnya. Consequently, the geo-political struggle for control of the region has led to the resurrection of “The Great Game” as a term to describe the struggle between the Bush and Putin governments to dominate the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Regional commentators have remarked upon the relative inexperience of the interim government trio of Mikhail Saakashvili, acting president Nino Burdzhnashvili and Zhurab Zhvania. These three former underlings of Shevardnadze will most likely make up the forthcoming government, with Saakashvili crowned president. Their overt reliance upon the Bush administration in Washington and their plans for the reintegration of Georgia can only further destabilise the Caucasus.

Saakashvili is threatening to reintegrate the province of Abkhazia back into Georgia, by force if necessary. After taking power, he growled, “The revolution continues and will only be over when Georgia becomes happy, successful and fully formed.”

This threat equally applies regarding the longstanding breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Aslan Abashidze, the Ajarian governor who threw his lot in with Shevardnadze during the November elections, says the province will boycott the upcoming January 4 presidential and parliamentary elections called by the interim government.

Until shortly before the November election, Abashidze and Shevardnadze were archenemies while Saakashvili was one of the then president’s golden boys. Abashidze has close relations with the Putin government, and Russian troops are stationed in the Ajarian capital of Batumi. Saakashvili is vowing to expel all Russian troops from Georgian soil.

Whilst campaigning in Batumi for November’s election, Saakashvili’s henchmen clashed with Ajarian security forces. Handguns were drawn, but nobody was seriously hurt during a mass brawl.

Abashidze recently spent time in Moscow with Russian political and business leaders, also visiting Armenia and Azerbaijan on Shevardnadze’s behalf before he was deposed. Rail and air links between Batumi and Tbilisi are severed. Both Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities put their armed forces on alert once news from Tbilisi confirmed the success of the coup.

In addition, the country is fraught with numerous divisions upon which demagogues can flourish under circumstances of want and inequality. Georgia’s ethnic Azeri-dominated area of Kvemo Kartli and the ethnic Armenian region of Samtkhe-Javakheti, where Russia also has troops stationed, are unstable. The breakaway province of Abkhazia is predominately Muslim, whilst the Orthodox Georgian and Russian church dominates in Tbilisi. Many South Ossetians have a greater affinity with the Russian region of North Ossetia than with Tbilisi.

The Georgian economy is at serious risk of financially defaulting, with debts accounting for 60 percent of GDP. The provisional government has continued with the austerity policies of its predecessor Shevardnadze and vowed to adhere to the demands of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, not to mention Washington. The administration, its key members nurtured under the tutelage of Shevardnadze, has warned Georgians to tighten their belts and not to expect any dramatic progress in living standards.

Emulating the Shevardnadze regime, the interim government shared out official posts between their relatives and close associates. Even then, some elements were dissatisfied and tension emerged between the various factions.

Since the ousting of Shevardnadze, the Russian and American governments’ struggle for Tbilisi has accelerated. Bush apparently told Georgian interim leader Nino Burdzhnashvili, “If you have a problem, call the White House and we will help immediately.” For his part, the Russian president Vladimir Putin has put the new Tbilisi incumbents under pressure at every possible opportunity.

US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently completed a regional tour of the Caucasus and Central Asia. He was originally scheduled to fly from Baku, Azerbaijan, to visit the Uzbeki leader Islam Karimov, but thick fog over the Uzbek capital Tashkent prevented any landing. Instead, Rumsfeld was flown to Tbilisi to visit those who, with the assistance of his government, had unseated Shevardnadze.

Speaking aggressively on behalf of the new comprador regime in Tbilisi, Rumsfeld informed Moscow in no uncertain terms that it must immediately abide by the Istanbul Accord of 1999 to withdraw its troops from Georgia. To which Igor Ivanov, the Russian foreign secretary

retorted, "As a professional diplomat, I recommend everyone read the documents, preferably the original." The Putin government claims to require at least a decade to withdraw from Georgian territory, and that the accord allows it to retain a smaller number of troops in the country.

Rumsfeld continued by praising Georgia as "a staunch friend of the West," commending its contribution towards the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan. (Shevardnadze dispatched a special operations forces contingent to Iraq after the coalition invasion.)

As Rumsfeld visited, a team of State Department, Pentagon, Treasury and National Security Council officials were already in Tbilisi consulting with the interim administration over future policies.

Rumsfeld also found time to visit the Train and Equip military complex where the Bush regime has special operations and marines training four battalions of Georgian troops. Acting president Burdzhnashvili took the occasion to express her deepest wish that the two-year \$64 million programme will continue in the future, eventually leading to the training of a mechanised army unit. Using this foothold, the Bush administration intends to keep military advisers and troops permanently in Georgia.

Meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell in Maastricht, just after the Tbilisi coup, at a meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Burdzhnashvili called for the swift withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgian soil. Condemning Russia for supporting two breakaway republics and the separatist ambitions of Abkhazian despot Abashidze, Powell insisted that Moscow should "respect the territorial integrity of Georgia." The US has troops in the Pankisi Gorge region of Georgia, in numerous Central Asian states, and of course in Iraq, only a few hundred miles south of Tbilisi.

Burdzhnashvili called for Georgia to be allowed to join both NATO and the European Union. In her very first speech to the nation as its new leader, she promised not to deviate from the strongly pro-Western policies pursued by Shevardnadze until his later veer towards the Kremlin.

In the last few days, the government in Tbilisi has decried Russia for seeking to undermine its sovereignty by introducing a new visa for residents of Abkhazia. Burdzhnashvili claimed this was "one set of rules for the lord and another for the vassal," now that Abkhazians can obtain an entry visa on arrival at Russian airports whereas other Georgians must queue at the Russian embassy.

Georgian security officials have also accused Russia of sponsoring saboteurs planning to attack the \$3 billion oil and gas pipelines.

Russia continues to assert that Shevardnadze was removed by undemocratic means. Whilst laying most of the blame at the door of Washington, Putin has also chastised the US orientation of Shevardnadze. In a cabinet meeting immediately after the Tbilisi coup, Putin spoke of how "The change of power in Georgia is the logical result of a series of systematic mistakes in its domestic, foreign and economic policies."

For his part, Shevardnadze blames, amongst others, George Soros for his downfall and called the Bush administration a "fair-weather friend" that ditched him when the going got tough.

Moscow has demanded Georgia explain why days after the coup it permitted Russian business tycoon Boris Berezovsky to land in Tbilisi without hindrance. The Russian foreign ministry reminded Georgia of its responsibility regarding his international arrest warrant. Wanted for fraud and embezzlement, Berezovsky has been granted asylum in Britain. Travelling under the alias of a British citizen, Elein Platon, he briefly visited Ekho Moskvyy radio. Berezovsky is among the oligarchs most closely associated with Boris Yeltsin who, having later fallen out with Vladimir Putin, fled the country. Berezovsky has admitted giving financial aid to rebel separatists in Chechnya.

The Clinton regime was instrumental in initiating US penetration into the Southern Caucasus and Caspian after capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union. Together with an international oil consortium, it aggressively courted the Caucasus regimes, especially Azerbaijan and

Georgia, with vast amounts of misappropriated aid and bribes, forcing through the pipeline deals to bring oil from the Caspian to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. The gas will arrive in another Turkish destination, inland Erzurum. Clinton described this enterprise as being of "vital national interest."

The Bush administration has continued where the Democrats left off, making the necessary changes as and when required. Richard Miles, who later would play a central role in Shevardnadze's downfall after becoming ambassador to Georgia last year, was in 1993 named ambassador to neighbouring Azerbaijan. His role was to overcome inertia concerning pipeline construction contracts. His later move to Tbilisi would coincide with the deployment of US troops into Georgia's Pankisi Gorge last year.

Speaking in 1998, Vice President Richard Cheney admitted, "I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian."

In June 2000, the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College published a document entitled "US military engagement with Transcaucasus and Central Asia," identifying the region as providing an alternative to the potentially unstable Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula for a source of energy. While some of the more extravagant claims concerning the Caspian's yield are being questioned, the whole region, including as yet underexploited Kazakhstani reserves, add up to a potential 160 billion barrels of oil.

The document recognises the threat posed by the major regional power, warning, "Russia could sabotage many if not all of the forthcoming energy projects by relatively simple and tested means and there is not much we could do absent a strong and lasting regional commitment."

Capitalising upon the 9/11 attacks, this is exactly what the Bush regime has accomplished—a regional military commitment, with bases right across Central Asia.

Subsequent wars on Afghanistan in Central Asia and Iraq in the Persian Gulf underline the role of access to energy sources in Washington's geopolitical calculations. Its policies have combined economic, political and military measures in order to secure control of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

To be continued



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