

Georgian election worsens Russian-US tensions

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Mikhail Saakashvili is almost certain to be announced as the landslide winner of Georgian presidential election held on January 4. At least half of the country's population voted, thereby validating the result. Final results have not yet been released, but exit polls indicate a victory for Saakashvili by a significant margin. Some believe the 37-year-old has achieved at least 85 percent of the total vote, other claim at least 90 percent. The official tally is scheduled for completion on January 12.

Local commentators expect Nino Burjanadze to become speaker of the parliament, while the third member of the coup triumvirate—Zhurab Zhavnia—is a strong contender to become prime minister.

Amongst the Georgian population who turned out to vote for Saakashvili the weight of expectation is substantial. Many who voted for the former lawyer added messages to their voting slips like “Misha, don't forget pensioners” or “Misha, fight corruption”. (Misha is an affectionate abbreviated version of Mikhail.)

Saakashvili is attempting to dampen these expectations by warning Georgians that Rome was not built in a day. Georgian national debt is approaching \$1.7 billion and the Saakashvili team intends to adhere to the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Shortly after Georgians went to the polls the IMF announced it would hold talks early in February with the new Georgian government on a possible new loan programme. Any further loans made to Tbilisi by the IMF will demand structural adjustment measures involving austerity and welfare retrenchment.

Also referring to “Misha”, the recently deposed ex-president Eduard Shevardnadze announced his intention to vote for Saakashvili. After generously praising the incumbent, Shevardnadze warned Saakashvili not to raise the population's expectations too high: “He should talk less and work more.”

While many Georgians have misplaced illusions in Saakashvili their patience is not indefinite. Speaking to the *New York Times*, 40-year-old Dato Bashidze, who like most Georgians struggles to make ends meet, illustrated the finite limits of patience with the new president when he said of Saakashvili, “He'll have a little time. That's why we elected

him, to get to work on our demands.”

It has recently emerged that US President George W. Bush wrote to Shevardnadze shortly after the Tbilisi coup to thank him for going quietly. The letter requests that the former leader help the new regime, which Bush describes as lacking experience.

Apart from the coup engineered in Washington, the succession of Saakashvili from Shevardnadze was an entirely in-house affair. The newly incumbent president and his former mentor still share a presidential compound and are rumoured to have already struck a deal on taxes to be paid on the ill-gotten family riches of Shevardnadze.

Saakashvili has announced his initial intentions in government to be a serious crackdown on corruption, to establish the rule of law and protect the Georgian judiciary and state. No mean feat. The Georgian economy is a shambles. Over 60 percent of the population live in dire poverty, the traditional middle classes have effectively collapsed, unemployment is rife and the state coffers collect only cobwebs. Saakashvili's ambitious plan will not be achieved without the collective cracking of Georgian heads. For just such a task the president also announced the future formation of elite law enforcement agencies.

Bush took the opportunity of Orthodox Christmas Day to congratulate the man who his administration effectively brought to power. Washington also invited Saakashvili to visit the US in the very near future.

Speaking about their conversation to the press, Georgy Arvaladze, a spokesperson for the new Tbilisi regime, said that Bush also told Saakashvili that he wanted regular contact in future concerning international and security issues. Saakashvili is their man and Washington will not allow that fact to slip his mind even for a second. US Secretary of State Colin Powell will initially speak to Saakashvili when he attends his inauguration in Tbilisi on January 25.

The Pentagon wasted no time in pressing home its current advantage in the Southern Caucasus when it announced shortly after Saakashvili's election that it is to privatise its military presence in Georgia. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, they plan to contract a team of retired American military officers to equip and advise Georgian officials. Upon hearing

the news the Putin regime in Moscow was said to be spitting feathers.

Twenty to thirty military advisers are already in Tbilisi after US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited there in December. These mercenaries, or as they are officially known “private defence consultants”, are employed by Washington security firm Cubic, which has a three year \$15 million contract with the Pentagon to support Georgian defence.

The *Guardian* quoted an anonymous senior Western diplomat stating, “One of the goals is to make the army units capable of seizing and defending a given objective. The consultants will work with US defence liaisons in the Tbilisi embassy and the European command in Stuttgart.”

He added that the programme would probably continue beyond the initial three-year plan.

One of their main tasks will undoubtedly be the defence of the oil and gas pipelines soon to run through Georgian territory. The talk of “seizing and defending a given objective” has ominous implications for the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Saakashvili is fond of threatening them with their forcible reintegration into the Georgian State and the closing of Russian bases within Georgia.

More immediately it may sound alarm bells in the semi-autonomous region of Ajaria. Regional leader Aslan Abashidze at first refused to recognise Saakashvili and the ousting of Shevardnadze. Until he changed his mind after a visit from the American Ambassador Richard Miles, Abashidze was threatening to boycott the January 4 presidential elections.

Voting in the region went ahead. However, only days after the presidential election Abashidze has reimposed a state of emergency in Ajaria. The last one was only lifted the day before presidential voting took place. The regime in Batumi, the Ajarian capital, claimed that “certain forces” were trying to overthrow its leadership. The Ajarian security forces arrested members of the National Movement and student group Kmara, closely associated with Saakashvili. Regional police claim to have found illegal weapons, drugs and dollars at the home of a Kmara members’ relative.

The Kmara members had campaigned in Batumi, distributing leaflets that read “Down with Abashidze’s dictatorship!” Georgian deputy interior minister Givi Ugulava said Abashidze had exceeded his authority: “The declaration of a state of emergency is the prerogative of the Georgian president.”

Zhurab Zhvania threatened Abashidze that such moves could have grave consequences.

The quoted Western diplomat also told the *Guardian* that the Bush administration is considering making Georgia a “forward operational area” where military equipment and fuel would be stored. Together with the mercenaries the implementation of such a plan would grant Washington a “virtual base” on Georgian soil without the diplomatic troubles of establishing a permanent base.

The Russian army maintains two military bases in the country

and recently announced, much to the annoyance of Tbilisi and Washington, that it would require more than three years to dismantle them. The Kremlin has set a new date of 2011 for their withdrawal from the south Caucasus nation.

However, recriminations are flying in Moscow over the Putin regime’s comprehensive out-manoeuvring by Washington over the Tbilisi succession. While some advisers and commentators urge Moscow to seek cooperation with Tbilisi, others warn of Saakashvili’s insincerity concerning his public declarations of improving Georgian relations with Russia.

The Kremlin’s first response to Saakashvili’s victory has been one of procrastination. Leonid Radzikhovskii in a commentary published in the *Versia* newspaper, simply declared, “So far, the Kremlin hasn’t decided what to do about Georgia.” Playing for time, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Aleksandr Yakovenko, when asked about their attitude towards the new government in Tbilisi, replied that the regime would formulate an attitude when the official results are announced.

Eurasianet.com, a web site financed by billionaire George Soros, this week quoted Aleksei Malashenko, a researcher at the Moscow Carnegie Centre, who claims that the Putin regime is irrevocably split on how to deal with Tbilisi. Other commentators suggest that the Kremlin’s belligerent attitude towards Tbilisi masks the effective absence of a definite policy.

Sergei Karaganov, chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, is quoted by *Eurasianet.com* stating that since the collapse of the Soviet Union successive Russia governments simply have not had a seriously worked out Georgian or even South Caucasus policy:

“It was not even a great power policy but a parody of it.”

Karaganov advocates a friendly policy towards Georgia that, he claims, would allow Russia to take advantage of its geographical proximity to the south Caucasus. Karaganov writes, “[We] should start offering [Georgians] a carrot,” but adds darkly, “If need be, we can always use the stick.”

Those in Moscow with a more traditional foreign policy bent question Saakashvili’s conciliatory rhetoric. Director of the Institute for Political Research Sergei Markov, a man with close connections to the Kremlin, is sceptical of Tbilisi’s true intentions: “The ruling triumvirate in Georgia will continue its policy of squeezing Russian military bases out of the country and of attacking Moscow’s positions in international forums.”

Moscow is afraid that the new regime in Tbilisi will, with American support, forge ahead to join both NATO and the European Union, taking the country out of Russia’s orbit. Either way Moscow will not indefinitely stand back and allow Washington to dominate territory on its periphery.



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