

Bush visit to Georgia increases tensions with Putin government

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Speaking in Tbilisi on May 10, President George W. Bush quipped that he was in the neighbourhood and “thought we’d swing by.” However, his visit to the capital of Georgia was anything but casual. Amidst the self-satisfied bonhomie, Bush and Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili discussed issues with potentially explosive ramifications for the struggle between Russia and America for dominance over the Caucasus and all the territories that once made up the Soviet Union.

Saakashvili publicly protested that Bush’s visit was not about “an oil pipeline or any kind of military cooperation.” But that is what was undoubtedly discussed, along with the question of reducing Russian influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the continuing deployment of Georgian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline is set to open on May 25. The \$3.6 billion conduit will take five months just to fill with oil. It runs close to the disputed border between Georgia and South Ossetia and is vulnerable to attack .

The meeting came after Bush’s attendance at the Victory in Europe commemorations in Moscow, which Saakashvili refused to attend. Discussions have recently broken down between Moscow and Tbilisi concerning the withdrawal of Russian troops from two bases on Georgian soil.

Through considerable financial and military assistance, Georgia has practically become a client state by which Washington pursues its economic, political and military ambitions in Eurasia.

State and private media extolled the public to come out and welcome the US president. Tbilisi was festooned with posters of Bush for weeks prior to his arrival, so that his arrival together with a 700-strong entourage took on the appearance of a visit to a colonial possession.

Saakashvili told Bush: “We welcome you as a freedom fighter.” Just 500 miles south of Tbilisi is the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, where Bush would not receive quite the same reception but where 800 Georgian troops are currently stationed. A further 200 Georgian troops are currently serving in Afghanistan. The Georgian president named Bush

as the first recipient of the Order of Saint George, named after the country’s patron saint, for his supposed “promotion of freedom in the world.”

Saakashvili came to power in October 2003 in a US-backed ousting of Eduard Shevardnadze. Georgia occupies a crucial strategic position in the south Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It was the first example of a now well-rehearsed strategy of replacing governments amenable to Moscow with aggressively anti-Russian and Western-orientated governments. Saakashvili is pushing hard for Georgia to join both the European Union and NATO and misses no opportunity to rile Moscow.

Bush’s speech to the Georgian people was the usual hokum about peace and freedom. He called Georgia a “beacon of liberty” and congratulated Saakashvili on his “Rose Revolution.” But his speech was littered with barely veiled threats towards Russia. “We are living in historic times when freedom is advancing, from the Black Sea to the Caspian, and to the Persian Gulf and beyond,” declared Bush.

Speaking to reporters, Bush denied that his government would militarily assist Tbilisi in its conflict with breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In April the American ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, together with Caspian energy trouble-shooter Steven Mann, visited the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi in a fruitless attempt to reach a compromise with Tbilisi.

Bush did say that he would be happy to make a few phone calls to Sukhumi and the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali on behalf of Georgia. After Saakashvili took power it was reported that Bush spoke by telephone to threaten Aslan Abashidze shortly before he fled to Moscow and Georgian troops took back control of the autonomous and pro-Russian republic of Ajaria.

During his visit Bush indicated that resolving the issue of the breakaway republics was essential for Georgia’s entry into NATO. He directly warned the Kremlin to drop their support for the breakaway republics, insisting, “The territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia must be

respected by all nations.”

Bush devoted just 45 minutes to speak to representatives from the two breakaway republics and representatives from Georgia’s ethnic minorities. The sizeable ethnic Armenian minority in Georgia are particularly concerned about the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia because they see them as protection against the threat from neighbouring Turkey.

Tbilisi was treated to a sustained period of maintenance prior to the Bush visit. The run-down Georgian capital has witnessed a frantic last few weeks while hundreds of workers sought to patch up its decrepit infrastructure. The historic centre received its first coat of paint since then Russian President Leonid Brezhnev visited in the early 1980s, and the potholed roads were resurfaced.

Preparations for the visit spawned numerous puns, with locals joking that Bush should come more often and the state would have no alternative but to rebuild the entire country. But no amount of whitewash and tarmac can hide Georgian society’s deeper malaise. Despite Bush’s hailing of Saakashvili as a democrat, the Georgian leader is a political bully, an avowed free marketeer and entirely ruthless in his political aims.

On April 12, Human Rights Watch issued a report, “Georgia—Uncertain Torture Reform,” which asserted that Saakashvili’s administration had failed to fulfil its pledge to improve the nation’s atrocious civil rights record. HRW have catalogued the regular use of torture by police and security forces, as well as condemning a plea-bargaining system that allows wealthy defendants to pay the state to avoid trial.

On the very same day that HRW released their findings, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Georgia together with Russia had violated the rights of 13 Chechens. Two of the Chechens were effectively disappeared and landed up back in Russia as prisoners.

Since the ousting of Shevardnadze, “Absolutely nothing has changed at all,” says Ucha Nanuashvili, the executive director of the Human Rights Information and Documentation Centre.

The Council of Europe has previously warned that too much political power has become centralised around Saakashvili and that the country risks drifting into one-party rule or even a one-man dictatorship. Since the mysterious death of then Prime Minister Zhurab Zhavia last February, Saakashvili has sidelined the third member of the Rose Revolution triumvirate, Nino Burjanadze. She was not even initially invited to the first anniversary celebrations of the deposing of Aslan Abashidze from Ajaria until the last minute.

Approval ratings for Saakashvili amongst the Georgian

people have slipped 25 percent since his elevation to power. He retains approval ratings of just 38 percent. Street protests over continuing shortages of essential services like electricity and water, arbitrary anti-corruption measures and a general dissatisfaction with Saakashvili’s arrogance have recently prompted talk that the American trained lawyer might go the same way as his one time mentor, Shevardnadze.

Writing for *Transitions On-line*, Jaba Devdarani warned, “This is the very same wave of social discontent that propelled the Rose Revolution and brought down Shevardnadze.... The government should worry lest the unrest turn into an explosion.”

Some media commentators warned against any cheap triumphalism in Washington or Tbilisi surrounding Bush’s visit. A *New York Times* editorial lamented the antagonising of Russia by Bush’s provocative visits to Latvia and Georgia sandwiching the one to Moscow and urged efforts to win the support of Moscow to rein in Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

The *Times* of London was equally unimpressed with Bush’s clumsy approach. Their editorial sought to remind Washington of Georgia’s fragility as a functioning nation state. “Georgia is almost wholly dependent on Russia for energy supplies.... Its economy would collapse if more than a million Georgians now living in Russia did not send back remittances,” it stated.

The *Times* reminded its readers that the populations of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have repeatedly expressed a clear preference for alliance with Moscow, not Tbilisi.

Inside Washington cautionary voices have been raised against the Bush administration putting all its eggs into one basket with its support for Saakashvili. Charles King, an expert on US-Georgian relations at Georgetown University, cautioned the Republican administration that continually blaming the Russians for Georgia’s woes was counterproductive.

Speaking to the *Guardian* newspaper, he lamented, “In time even Georgia’s friends may come to wonder whether a country with fictitious borders and no plan for making them real is a country worth helping.”



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