



By Egor Kuroptev

GEORGIA AT A CROSSROADS

January 2020

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THE GAVRILOV NIGHT

The June 20, 2019 visit by a Russian state delegation (headed by a Duma Member Gavrilov) to the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in Tbilisi opened a period of escalating political tensions in Georgia. Considering the fact that the Russian military forces have occupied Georgian territories since 2008, the reaction of the Georgian people to any state visit from Russia can be nothing other than negative.



27th of June, 2019 by Nikolai Levshits

As soon as photos of Gavrilov hamming it up in the

Parliament Speaker's seat were released to the public, protesters filled the street in front of the Georgian parliament demanding that the Russian delegation leaves the country immediately and the Government of Georgia apologizes for the poor judgment of ever allowing the Russian delegation to enter the country in the first place. The Russian delegation left Georgia the same day, however the public continued to demand answers. Who allowed Russian officials to enter Georgian territory? Who organized the Assembly? But most importantly, the protesters demanded the resignation of the Speaker of the Parliament Kobakhidze.

As the government issued no explanation to the citizens, and the Georgian Dream ruling party refused to accept political responsibility for the affront, the protest continued to grow in size and intensity. As the night fell, the government moved to disperse the demonstration. It did so with a disproportionate use of force and brutality, tear gas and rubber bullets showered on unarmed masses. More than 200 people were seriously injured, including journalists. Injuries sustained by some protestors required hospitalization, and several people lost their eyes. Many activists were arrested.

The government rationalized this brutality by saying it was responding to intelligence of planned attacks against the building housing the Georgian Parliament. While indeed, there were around 150 protesters acting provocatively near the entrance to the Parliament, the gas and bullets were actually used against thousands of peaceful protesters further away— on the square and nearby streets.

This brutal government attack on freedom of expression has reignited the societal tension that had already been on a slow fire for years. Even before that tragic night (that has since been dubbed the Gavrilov's Night) Georgian authorities have been implicated in scandalous cases involving corruption, lack of reforms, economic stagnation, lack of transparency in courts, weak stance toward the Kremlin, lack of pushback against the Russian occupation of the country, government control of the media, improper use of administrative resources during elections, judicial partiality, law violations, undemocratic constitutional changes, and so on. Unfortunately, there had been no resolute response from either the Georgian society or the international community.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

For months leading up to the June 2019 events, cohesion had been growing among Georgian NGOs, activists, political leaders, journalists and legal experts in their opposition to the strengthening oligarchy and the country's slide toward autocracy. The protests in front of the Parliament organized by young activists from the movement they call "The Shame", were joined by more prominent political leaders and pro-western political parties. Their key demands included:

1. Resignation of the Minister of Internal Affairs Gakharia for his responsibility in the Gavrilov's Night;
2. Release of all political prisoners detained during the protests;
3. Introduction of an election reform establishing a proportional election system to ensure fair elections with multi-party democracy.

Seeking to quickly normalize the situation and disperse protests, the leader of the ruling party Bidzina Ivanishvili made a public promise to adopt constitutional changes and establish a proportional electoral system. Protests, however, continued with other demands.



20th of September, 2019 by Nikolai Levshits

In the days following June 20, 2019, the government carried out several more brutal dispersals of protests and rallies organized by activists and opposition parties and opened court cases against protests participants. As a gesture of an ultimate affront, Giorgi Gakharia— person officially responsible for the aggressive dispersals of protests—was appointed Prime Minister (in September 2019, a slew of other close Ivanishvili associated were appointed as heads of all defense and security ministries (Ministry of internal affairs – former head of the security of Ivanishvili; State security Service – former head of company “Cartu”, owned by Ivanishvili; Ministry of Defense – former head of “Cartu foundation”, owned by Ivanishvili, and others).

Needless to say, Ivanishvili has not kept his public promise regarding proportional electoral system.

The nation entered a new phase of open direct conflict between the majority of the Georgian society and the Government. Trust has also been broken between Georgian authorities and country's international strategic partners such as the U.S. and the European Union. This political crisis is still ongoing.

Polls published by NDI on the January 16, 2020 show that the ruling party has no more than 20% of support, and the opposition cumulatively commands around 35%. Although the percentage of undecided voters is still high, the main question still remains – will the Georgian Dream leader Ivanishvili “allow” the October 2020 elections to be conducted in a transparent, free and fair manner; or, will his team “prime” voters by threats, intimidation, bribes, as it had done many times during elections in Georgia in the past?

Another important question is whether the opposition parties would be able to work together to earn the trust of the Georgian society and present a good alternative to the ruling party. Although pro-western opposition parties managed to have a dialogue and plan to coordinate future actions, they still have to prove to the voters their readiness to build stable coalition government and not allow one party to dominate over others.

In this regard, it is interesting to compare the upcoming 2020 elections to those of 2012. One main difference is that, although the pro-western opposition parties today work in close coordination and dialogue, this unity has no single leader, but is instead directed by several leaders from all the political parties. This offers hope that Georgia can avoid a situation where one party or one leader would usurp the power the way billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili has done.

Unfortunately, the opposition is yet to offer concrete alternative visions on the economy, foreign policy or policy toward Russia. Their “anti-Ivanishvili” posture alone, as much as it resonates with the society, is not sufficient to ensure the stable and positive development of the country. On the tactical level, the opposition is sorely missing a plan for ensuring that the election results reflect the will of the society and for protecting votes against the government manipulation (which will undoubtedly become a significant factor during the upcoming elections).

Georgia’s current economic woes will certainly play a major role in the election. The impoverished population is exhausted by demonstrations and rallies. It is ready to cast its vote and change the government peacefully. The society had grown used to strong reforms, economic growth and strict positions toward the Kremlin. Then human rights violations and lack of freedom brought the Georgia Dream to power in 2012. Under the GD tenure, and especially during its second term, the Georgian standard of living plummeted, and reforms were aborted.

Polls published by IRI on November 16, 2019 and NDI on January 16, 2020 show that the population is ready for change, but their right for fair elections is under a serious threat, considering the previous experience of the 2018 Presidential Elections. In 2018 international and domestic observers expressed concerns about mobilization of voters through inappropriate means, instances of misuse of administrative resources. The upcoming parliamentary elections are much more important for the



18th of November, 2019 by Nikolai Levshits

country, so much more “attention” is expected from the ruling party.

In 2019, the Georgian Dream attacked not only its domestic critics, but also international organizations which publicized unfavorable information about the ruling party or government. In November 2019, for example, the leader of the ruling party Ivanishvili publicly attacked the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute who had for many years provided support to Georgia and conducted independent polls inside the country.

Ivanishvili’s ratings today are at their lowest point since his 2012 victory. His party commands only 20-23% of support, while the opposition has cumulatively 35%. Of course, such numbers recorded by IRI and NDI polls must have greatly displeased the ruler of Georgia, who then moved to publicly attack the well-respected U.S. organizations.

Georgian pro-Kremlin political party “Alliance of Patriots”¹ which has seats in parliament, has supported Ivanishvili’s narrative and organized protest activities against IRI and NDI. The Alliance of Patriots has also demanded investigations against NDI for working against Georgian interests.

The roll-back of the country’s democratic development (the extent of which has become apparent after the attacks on peaceful demonstrators; political persecution of opposition, independent media, and activists; the failure of deep-sea port project of Anaklia; open attacks on NDI and IRI; as well as by the efforts of Georgian opposition leaders to explain the urgency of this situation to strategic partners) has caused alarm in Washington, DC. On January 21, 2020, Representatives Adam Kinzinger, Gerald Connolly, Eliot Engel and Michael McCaul wrote to the Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia expressing their concern “over the decision to forego promised democratic reforms and the associated violence against peaceful protesters” in Georgia. Prominent American diplomats and political figures, such as Michael Carpenter, Mathew Bryza, David Kramer and others, have also expressed their deep concerns about the current situation in Georgia, the country once extolled for its successful democratic reforms. In response, The Government of Georgia released statements that the U.S. officials have wrong information and the level of cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. is at the highest levels at the moment.

¹ It’s well-known that “Alliance of Patriots” works both with Moscow and Georgian ruling party (Party was supported by government during elections 2016 / its members have regular meetings in Moscow before each elections).

THE KREMLIN'S CAMPAIGNS IN GEORGIA 2019 – 2020

Around March 2019, the Kremlin commenced an influence campaign aimed at swaying Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections in its favor. Russia's approach was to create and promote negative narratives against Georgia's neighboring countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey), as well as against its strategic partners—the U.S. and the NATO. The Kremlin's propaganda has sought to incite and exacerbate territorial disputes between Georgia and its neighbors; has used disinformation campaigns to poison relations between regional powers; and has advanced a narrative among Georgians that "Azerbaijan, Turkey and Armenia are real enemies of Georgia, and not Russia". Russia has funded conferences, media coverage and "expert opinions" to achieve this goal. However, this strategy failed in the aftermath of the Gavrilov's night, when the Georgian society massively and permanently turned against the Kremlin's influence in Georgia, forcing Russia to rethink and come up with a different plan.

The new influence campaign has been much softer in tone and has focused on convincing the Georgian society, as well as EU observers, that it is Ossetians who are the real enemies of Georgia and not

Russians. From August 2019, the Kremlin has heavily leveraged the Moscow-backed Tskhinvali regime to provoke unrest in the region, so that the Kremlin may come to the rescue and help both sides to achieve "peace".

In August 2019, an Ossetian delegation "found" a map dating from 1922, which "proved"

that certain parts of Georgian territory are in fact an Ossetian territory. In response to this discovery, the Ossetian side started rebuilding the occupation line (fences, barbed-wires, police posts and so on).

At weekly meetings that followed this discovery and involved Ossetians, Georgians, Russians and EU observers, the Russian delegation feigned great surprise to see this "map" and expressed uncertainty over its implications.

It is important to remember, that the occupation of South Ossetia is backed by the Kremlin, and the territory does not have its own border police. Its security is protected by the Russian FSB in accordance with the agreement signed by the Kremlin and the Tskhinvali regime. The KGB of South Ossetia has always been headed by retired Russian FSB officers.

Clearly, the Russian delegation uses its regime in Tskhinvali to manipulate the situation and convince the Georgian side and EU observers, or at least have it on the record, that the Russian side is trying to promote "peace", whereas the "Tskhinvali regime is inadequate". The same approach can be deduced from the infamous case of Dr. Gaprindashvili, in which the Tskhinvali regime illegally arrested one of the most respected Georgian doctors, and the Kremlin acted as the main advocate demanding the release of the doctor from Tskhinvali.



19th of October, 2019 by David Katsarava



19th of December, 2018 by Egor Kuroptev

Indeed, this strategy has worked very well: on the one hand, Russian officials can publicly distance themselves from provocations of Tskhinvali's regime and adopt the posture of main "peacekeepers" helping resolve the problems, which in reality, they themselves had caused to begin with. On the other hand, they have consistently and covertly pushed the Georgian government to pursue Kremlin's interests in Georgia.

Unfortunately, unnerved by the plummeting public support of GD and its policy toward Russia (as reflected in recent polls), Georgian authorities have decided to keep silent about the ongoing creeping annexation of Georgian territories. The government has issued a ban on media and NGO travel to the occupation lines. The tragedy of this predicament is such that publicity is required for the government and pro-governmental media to take meaningful measures to counter the Kremlin's influence in Georgia. Short of that, the situation will remain opaque, without proper observation or monitoring.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANAKLIA PORT

The government's pandering to the Russian and Chinese interests has negatively impacted the development of the deep-sea port of Anaklia— an issue with profound economic and even geopolitical implications.

The project had been originally supported and developed by a U.S. company, and was identified as a project of high interest to the U.S. government. Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin views such a project as a threat to its own interests. Over 1,000 companies in Georgia today are owned by Russian interests, including in such critical sector as communications, mining, hospitality, etc.

But China has also been quite displeased that the Anaklia Port project was implemented by U.S. and not Chinese companies. The propaganda campaign launched against Anaklia port in Russia may have been advanced by China, considering that China had a real chance to be in charge of this project and incorporate it into the Belt and Road Initiative. Anaklia port issue was discussed as a "military base of the United States in Georgia, that may threaten the security

of Russia” or “port, where the U.S. submarines and military ships will be placed”. NTV TV channel, as well as other popular Russian media outlets and military news agencies (such as official media portal of the Collective Security Treaty Organization) distributed such a disinformation.

Former Georgian Prime Minister Gharibashvili, one of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s closest associates, has been pushing for closer the Georgia-China relations since 2013. Under Ivanishvili’s government (in tenure since 2013), the cooperation between China and Georgia has increased significantly. There has been an increase in the level of investments; a “Free Trade Zone” agreement has been signed; Chinese companies have bought one of the Georgian banks; the Chinese have also built infrastructure, malls, an automotive plant, etc. In 2019, negotiations commenced between Chinese and Georgian telecommunication companies to develop a 5G network.

In December 2017, when the Anaklia Development Consortium was established, its key positions were distributed among Georgian TBC Bank and U.S., not Chinese companies.

In February 2018, former PM Gharibashvili was appointed as Adviser to the Supervisory Board of the CEFC China, which controls 75% of the Free Industrial Zone in Poti (directly connected with the Georgian port in Poti).

In 2017, according to Transparency International, one of the heads of CEFC, Patrick Ho, was arrested in New York. He was charged with bribing officials in African countries to promote the interests of the Chinese company. CEFC was also accused of illegal weapons sales and evading sanctions imposed on Iran.

The company founder and former head, Ye Jianming, who came to Georgia and met with the Prime Minister in 2016, has an international warrant against him. In November 2017, the US Justice Department accused CEFC of offering a US\$2 million bribe to the president of Chad for oil rights. In 2018, Ye was detained in China.

It follows that Georgia’s former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili was appointed as advisor to the Supervisory Board of the company managing regional projects of CEFC Energy Company Limited after the CEFC had been already implicated in international corruption scandals. In 2019 Irakli Gharibashvili resumed political activities and became the Minister of Defense of Georgia.

It is important to mention that the Georgian TBC bank owner Mamuka Khazaradze was acting as a leading force in Anaklia Development Consortium. He invited American companies and attracted attention of the U.S. government to the project. Khazaradze, as well as former PM of Georgia Kvirikashvili, who had close value-based cooperation with the U.S. government, made all needed steps to move Anaklia port project forward. As a result, Ivanishvili made Kvirikashvili resign. One of the reasons – rising level of independence of PM Kvirikashvili and Anaklia case, where, according to sources, interests of Bidzina Ivanishvili were not considered. As for Mr. Khazaradze, the Prosecutor’s Office “surprisingly” launched investigation into money laundering against TBC bank owner “on legalization of illicit income”. Following these events, Khazaradze founded oppositional political movement and accused ruling regime in undermining Anaklia port project.

In December 2019, the Anaklia Port development was abruptly stopped. The Georgian government announced that it would cancel the investment agreement signed with the Anaklia Development Consortium on October 3, 2016. According to the official statement, the consortium did not succeed in obtaining funds required for the project. The consortium claims that the government has not helped, but rather sabotaged the project: “Instead of supporting, the government has practically sabotaged this project in the last several months,” said Levan Akhvdiani, general director of the Anaklia Development Consortium.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the start of 2020, Georgia is no longer the region's leader known for its reforms, stable economic growth or democratic development. The nation is still nursing the wounds from the brutal dispersal of peaceful demonstrations, and new rallies are being planned against Russian occupation, government's ignorance and for fair elections.

The people are exhausted and demoralized by the government that usurps power, by the opposition that lacks strategy, by one-party rule, by poverty, by the broken judicial system. They have also been affected by the disinformation spewed not only by the Kremlin and other foreign powers, but by local media and its propaganda (more than 400 government-backed Facebook accounts (bots, trolls) were blocked in the end of 2019 in Georgia according to Facebook report).

Nevertheless, the Georgian people are also ready for change, even if no viable alternative is present and fears are strong that their voices will once again be stolen.

2020 is promising to be the year of high importance and big decisions for Georgia. The country will have to decide whether it wants to move forward with its pro-democratic aspirations and incorporate into the Western society or continue growing weaker with no ability to stand against the Russian interests in the country.

The U.S. and EU support and special attention are critical to ensure free and transparent elections, especially if the government reneges on its promise of proportional system and moves to conduct the 2020 elections under the existing mixed electoral system. Attention of the international community and Georgia's strategic partners, especially when it comes to monitoring of the election process, will help support fair elections, and empower Georgia to stand firm for its pro-western choice and reemerge as a regional leader in reforms and democratic development.

It is clear that the level of possible involvement of international partners is limited. That's why, on the local level, our duty is to provide unbiased observation of the elections as well as society control both on pre-elections campaign as well as votes counting process. One of measures helpful to achieving this goal, may be creation of an alternative observers' network that will consist of activists groups all around the country. It could help protect citizens during the elections from government brutality. It will also help mitigate the problem of coopted or coerced observers, registered on behalf of political parties. Such a network could become a real force, which will defend the choice of Georgian society in each election, not only in 2020. As a result, Georgia will have a leading independent force to guarantee one of the main right of the people, protected by constitution, but violated by all regimes, willing to stay in power no matter what.

- Starting 2018, independent activist groups became the most powerful and influential force in Georgia, organizing protests, and uniting Georgian society against human rights violations inside the country, or against threats coming from outside. Young, knowledge-based, pro-democratic activists, willing to live in modern free European country proved that they are the force the country could rely on. They showed that they will never let any political organization push them or make them play by somebody's rules, not the rules demanded by Georgian society and guaranteed by the constitution.

While activists in Georgia are effective in regard with organizing protests or uniting people around any hot topic, the issue is they are divided and do not have any unity, structure or strategy. To achieve the specific goal of votes protection, these disparate groups around the country must be divided, and a joint committee should be set up. This can build unity and lead it to upcoming (and all future) elections as a joint mechanism that will defend Georgian society from any kind of violations during elections campaign as well as protect votes during elections period.

For such a network to be developed:

- network should be registered as observing force on behalf of the NGO(s) not a party;
- independent activists and activists' groups in each city (district) or village should be organized and structured;
- coordinators in each city, district, village should be appointed;
- a series of trainings for coordinators should be conducted;
- a series of trainings for activists in each city (district), village should be conducted;
- organizing committee should be appointed;
- international partners (embassies representatives) should act as observers inside of organizing committee;
- special soft should be developed:
 - o for network management and coordination;
 - o for reporting both during campaign and on elections day;
 - o for parallel-counting during elections;
- analysts should join the committee to prepare deep analysis of data (statistics; votes count; violations;)
- lawyers should join the committee to provide up-to-date consultations and prepare reports;

The implementation of proposed concept is difficult and requires deep knowledge of inner political processes in Georgia as well as unquestionable authority to unite and lead the first society-based observers network. Regarding above-mentioned facts, the process should be launched immediately, to provide Georgian people with a very effective tool, which will contribute to free and fair elections and knowledge-based choice free from political pressure.



Free Russia Foundation is an independent nonprofit organization with a 501 (c) 3 status registered in the U.S. in 2014.

The work of Free Russia Foundation is focused in three key mission areas:

1. Advancing the vision of a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Russia governed by the rule of law by educating the next generation of Russian leaders committed to these ideals;
2. Strengthening civil society in Russia and defending human rights activists persecuted by the Russian government; and
3. Supporting formulation of an effective and sustainable Russia policy in the United States and Europe by educating policy makers and informing public debate.

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Washington, DC 2019