

Commentaries

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the Election:
Where to now,
and how?*

*Armenia's
Strategic Setback*

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Where to now, and how?

George Mchedlishvili*

The October 27th presidential election was a defining moment in Georgia's recent history in more than one way. First of all, it marked the end of the almost 10-year presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, an important and contradictory period. Saakashvili's rule saw the building of the genuine foundations of a new state, but was marred by the increasingly authoritarian style of governance in the final years, as well as the irreparably damaged relations with Russia – a mixed legacy, to put it in a nutshell. Secondly, on the day of inauguration, November 17, Georgia ceased to be a presidential republic and became a parliamentary one, with greater responsibilities vested in the office of the prime minister.

Thirdly, setting a precedent in the post-Soviet space, and in a historically very rare move, reclusive billionaire-turned-politician Bidzina Ivanishvili - who defeated Saakashvili's "United National Movement" in the October 2012 parliamentary election with his broad-based "Georgian Dream" - voluntarily relinquished his political power and prime ministerial responsibilities. According to him, this is for the good of democracy and civil society in Georgia. His critics, however, say that the move has allowed him to shirk responsibility for future mistakes and

setbacks, thereby remaining a "savior".

These criticisms are probably at least partially valid. Both the newly elected president and the newly appointed Prime Minister, 31-year old Irakly Garibashvili, owe their posts entirely to Bidzina Ivanishvili. With no political experience (or very limited, in Margvelashvili's case), they are easy targets for speculation that Ivanishvili will remain the de facto puppet master of Georgian politics, leaving the politically unskilled president and Prime Minister as just rubber-stamps. If this does indeed come to pass, it will be extremely undesirable for this fledgling democracy, and will most likely put a dampener on Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration quest. Thus, in order to maintain or strengthen the country's image as a well-performing aspiring state, Georgian leaders will have to need become genuinely independent political personalities.

At least in one regard, the new leadership is lucky, as they have begun on a high note, by initialing the Association Agreement at the Vilnius Summit in late November. Now, the ball is in Georgia's court in terms of capitalizing on this momentum. Sustained and dedicated efforts will have to be undertaken after the Summit in order to convert the hopes into a reality. Here the issue of dedicated and strong personal and institutional leadership will be key, especially as the road ahead looks like an uphill battle with many complications, both domestic and international. Look-

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ing to the historical experiences of countries that have found themselves in a similar position in terms of political goals, breakthroughs have been accomplished by strong leadership.

The most obvious and powerful impediment to Georgia's foreign policy orientation is the increasingly aggressive Russia, hell-bent on derailing the European aspirations of post-Soviet states. The limited dialogue with Russia over the last year could only go so far, given the decidedly divergent interests of the two states.

Predictably, Russia has shown its teeth on a number of occasions with countries like Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Armenia made a sharp U-turn in September - submitting to Russian pressure - and abandoned its European aspirations in favor of the Customs Union. A few days ago, Ukraine caved in the face of Russian trade sanctions and suspended its negotiations with the European Union, which means Kyiv will not sign an association agreement. Moldova has so far shown its determination not to succumb to Russian economic pressure and Moscow's policy towards break-away Transnistria, but Russian pressure is continuing to mount.

As far as Georgia is concerned, economic and energy dependency on Russia is still there, though it has been significantly reduced over the last few years, following significant assistance from Azerbaijan. Now, the country is better prepared to withstand Moscow's economic bullying. Thus the only av-

enue for Moscow is to play its security and military cards. The past year has seen intensified fence building around the Administrative Border of the occupied South Ossetia; Russia has also provocatively moved the barbed wire deeper into the uncontested territory of Georgia proper, which might represents one direction of further aggression on Russia's part. Another potential area of vulnerability could be the province of Samegrelo, adjacent to Abkhazia. The myth underpinning the potential aggression is already in place, as some Abkhaz "historians" and members of the puppet government claim that about 800 km² of Samegrelo is "historically Abkhaz". There is also the Javakheti region, predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians. So far they have not raised their complaints beyond greater cultural autonomy, so it will not be so easy for Russia to sow seeds of serious discord. Besides the escalating tensions, this would obviously run counter to Armenian state interests. However, recent developments indicate that Moscow is in virtual command of Yerevan and the Armenian leadership is too dependent on Russia to pursue their state interests first.

The latter challenges are all the more pressing as is it widely perceived - and oftentimes perceptions are at least as important as the real state of affairs - that the US is pursuing a neo-isolationist course. Washington is looking for a pretext to disengage, rather than engage, in major international and regional affairs, particularly the ones that

require tougher approaches. Defending Georgia from very likely Russian would certainly require confronting Russia, both politically and economically.

But the difficulties ahead of Georgia are not limited to the potential foreign policy threats. European integration and DCFTA do provide a tried and tested blueprint for thorough reforms, but these are reforms that imply government transparency and regulatory modifications. Such reforms may be painful, and go against the interests many businessmen, as well as proving more costly in social terms. This could create a backlash and significantly erode the currently strong support for EU in Georgia, thus jeopardizing the Association Agreement. On the other hand, the Customs Union offers more immediate short-term benefits and might prove more tempting for an economically weak country. In connection with this, the EU's current economic woes and lack of unified foreign policy and strategy toward Eastern Partners hardly provide an auspicious backdrop ahead of the rigors of reforms. But if the strategy of the European Union becomes more judicious and flexible, these difficulties might be overcome.