Alumni

Rose Revolutionary

It's not unheard of for young, Western-trained citizens of the former USSR to modernize rusty old Soviet industries. As president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili wants to clean up his whole country.

By
Erin Arvedlund
|
Winter 2004-05

On November 22, 2003, a young Georgian politician named Mikheil Saakashvili led a hundred thousand angry protesters through the streets of Tbilisi to Parliament. Clad in jeans and a black leather jacket, and carrying a single rose instead of a weapon, Saakashvili ’94LAW strode into the chamber and shouted down President Eduard Shevardnadze on national television. The white-haired, glassy-eyed Shevardnadze, widely believed to have rigged the country’s recent parliamentary elections, seemed to know the jig was up. His bodyguards whisked him away, and Saakashvili walked to the podium, faced the cameras, and drank the departed president’s glass of tea. Shevardnadze resigned the next day, and two months later Saakashvili, 36, was elected the country’s new president with 96 percent of the vote.

Seizing the office of the president proved more glamorous than moving into it. Saakashvili found the place in a post-Soviet shambles — full of drab, decrepit wooden desks and chairs, along with evidence of the cats Shevardnadze had brought in to address the building’s rat problem. Dislodging autocrats, Saakashvili is quickly learning, can be a lot easier than cleaning up the messes they leave behind.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, corruption and poverty have been the only constants in Georgia, a small but strategically important republic in the Caucasus. Saakashvili inherited an economy that’s roughly 50 percent underground and a government with no legitimate revenue stream. Educated in the West, he now faces the unenviable task of introducing democratic values — transparency, meritocracy, over-the-table capitalism — to a country where the rule of law has rarely been the

rule. Simultaneously, he must rein in a pair of breakaway regions that are actively vying for reunion with Russia. And he must do it all while battling the perception that he is a power-hungry demagogue — a battle in which he has been, at times, his own worst enemy.

“He sees himself not just as Western-oriented, but as a true Westerner,” says Robert Legvold, a professor of political science at Columbia currently on leave to edit a book on Georgian politics. “His democratic commitment is genuine. On the other hand, he has to deal with domestic problems, like separatism and a weak state, and has shown himself to be a Georgian nationalist — and nationalism at its core is based on undemocratic instincts.”

Back in the Ex-USSR

Georgia is so dysfunctional that most Georgians with any ambition leave to seek their fortunes elsewhere — and that included Saakashvili. Taking advantage of the Edmund Muskie Fellowship Program for exceptional scholars from former Soviet republics, he came to the United States in his mid-20s and earned a master’s degree in law from Columbia and did further graduate work at The George Washington University. In 1995, while interning in the New York law firm of Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler, he was approached by Zurab Zhvania, an old friend from Georgia who was working on behalf of then-president Shevardnadze to recruit talented young Georgians to politics. Saakashvili would later joke that he left the U.S. and a promising law career because “I didn’t want to be another bored New York lawyer.”

Since returning to Georgia, he’s been anything but bored. He immediately won a seat in parliament and began making a name for himself, pushing for a new electoral system and an independent judiciary. Both efforts met with limited success, but within a few years he would be achieving meaningful reforms. After being appointed justice minister by his mentor Shevardnadze in 2000, Saakashvili cleaned up the corrupt and highly politicized Georgian criminal justice and prison system — efforts that earned praise from international observers and human-rights activists.

He stirred up a hornet’s nest of controversy in mid-2001, however, when he widened his anticorruption campaign, accusing other top ministers of profiting from illegal

business deals and pressuring Shevardnadze to confiscate their property. The president turned on him, and Saak-ashvili resigned. “I consider it immoral for me to remain as a member of Shevardnadze’s government,” he declared, alleging that corruption had penetrated to the very center of Georgian politics. “Current developments in Georgia,” he warned, “will turn the country into a criminal enclave in one or two years.”

Ordinary Georgians were already distrustful of the administration, and this confrontation brought Saakashvili a windfall of public goodwill. He parlayed it into a grassroots campaign for reform, founding the United National Movement in October 2001 and joining forces with other parties such as the United Democrats, headed by his old friend Zhvania, to call for government accountability. Then, last fall, officials declared Shevardnadze’s party the victor in parliamentary elections. Independent exit polls had shown Saakashvili’s opposition winning handily, and foreign monitors criticized the vote for “serious irregularities.” Saakashvili urged Georgians to take to the streets in nonviolent protest.

For weeks, there were massive demonstrations, culminating in the march on Parliament and Shevardnadze’s resignation. It would become known as the “Rose Revolution,” a name that recalled another bloodless uprising — the 1989 ouster of the Communists from Czechoslovakia. “The Velvet Revolution has taken place in Georgia,” Saakashvili exulted. He went on national television to appeal for calm from his followers and security forces, and to assure them that “Shevardnadze is over.”

Coup Two

Saakashvili scored another popular victory with one of his first acts as president, taking control of a breakaway seaside region called Adjaria. The local strongman, Aslan Abishidze, had literally burned his bridges with Georgia, denying Adjarians access to the rest of the republic. Saakashvili saw the crisis as an opportunity to angle for Abishidze’s removal. He sent foot soldiers into Adjaria to help the locals organize street protests. He secretly made contact with members of Abishidze’s own palace guard and received assurances that they would not defend their boss. And he appealed to Russian president Vladimir Putin, whose national security adviser was able to persuade Abishidze that exile in Moscow was his best option. When he fled, Saakashvili flew to Adjaria and received a hero’s welcome. He arranged a media day

at Abishidze’s villa on the Black Sea, and, in a scene reminiscent of his showdown with Shevardnadze, sat on the beach sipping the former strongman’s wine while chatting with reporters.

It was the second time in a matter of months that he had deposed a formidable figure without violence. But Saakashvili followed these successes with some serious missteps. In two other breakaway regions — Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which identify ethnically with Russia — he drew swords with the Kremlin. Before setting out on an official visit to the U.S., he gave an order to fire on all ships passing through Georgian territorial waters, including cruise ships carrying Russian tourists. “I say this so that tourists who are now coming to Abkhazia will hear it,” he snapped in August. The threats rattled Saakashvili’s supporters; he suddenly sounded like a power-drunk dictator. They startled the international community as well, evoking memories of the bloody civil war in 1992 when Tbilisi sent the army into Abkhazia. Within a year, 300,000 civilians had fled. Many refugees from that conflict still live in hotels lining the beach. Saakashvili eventually backed down, but the damage to his reputation had been done. “People in Washington now see him as impetuous and hotheaded,” says Legvold. “He’s still a welcome guest in the U.S., but officials in the Bush administration didn’t think what he did over Ossetia to force the issue was wise. He presents a mixed picture — a Western man, but a nationalist, and what some people see as a headstrong leader. He’s a political rocket, who went from nothing to great prominence.”

The breakaway regions remain a burr under the saddle of Saakashvili, whose efforts to reunite Georgia have collided with the region’s hopes of rejoining Russia after more than a decade of de facto independence. But his statements on the subject are now more measured and diplomatic. “I think we should not rush,” he told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* this past summer. “It’s a matter of time and patience.” Even his critics concede Saakashvili learned a swift lesson.

Seeking Stability

Saakashvili has been aggressively courting both Washington and Europe since his landslide election in January, overtures that have only deepened the Kremlin’s ambivalence about Georgia. Most recently, Russia dub-bed Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge a haven for Chechen terrorists. While even some West-ern diplomats privately

acknowledge the likely truth of this, the greater fear is that Putin will employ the Bush Doctrine and strike Georgia preemptively — a move that would sink the region into yet another bloody conflict.

As an insurance policy, Saakashvili has sought even closer ties with the White House. “On the one hand we have our relations with Russia, but it sometimes takes three to be on the safe side,” Saakashvili said after meeting this summer with then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. “The U.S. involvement helped us to avoid conflicts in the past. We want to sustain peace, and every call from Washington is always very, very important.”

But Saakashvili’s relationship with Putin will be defining. “Of all the leaders, those two are the most alike,” notes Saakashvili’s old boss and mentor Scott Horton, a partner at Patterson, Belknap and an adjunct professor at the Columbia Law School. “Saakashvili and Putin are both second-generation [post-Soviet] leaders, they both have law backgrounds, and they both deeply want ‘dictatorship of the law’ in their governments.”

Yet the ghosts of Shevardnadze-era corruption and cronyism still haunt Georgia, sapping confidence in its revitalization. That’s why Saakashvili invited billionaire financier George Soros to help pay some government salaries and boost all-important tax collection. Soros’s Open Society Institute, along with some European aid agencies, gives money to the United Nations, which in turn pays government employees as much as $1,500 a month depending on rank. By 2007, the Georgian government should be picking up the entire salary tab.

Some of Saakashvili’s reforms have already shown tangible results. Within a year of his inauguration, young, newly trained policemen began patrolling the streets of Tbilisi — and they’re not asking for bribes anymore, aid officials say. The concern is that other successes won’t be as visible. “It’s well and good to say revenue collection is improving,” says Karin Lissakers, adviser to Soros on globalization issues, “but that does not necessarily show up in schools, in day-to-day life — at least not yet.”

Extreme Makeover

Saakashvili's studies outside of Georgia did much to influence his governing style. "I met Misha when he was studying at Columbia," says Horton, "and we have had a lot of common interests ever since, including economic reforms and anticorruption programs." "Misha," as everyone in Georgia calls him, tried to push those programs aggressively during the Shevardnadze presidency, but was always stonewalled. "That was part of the reason why he founded the opposition," Horton says. "Columbia's influence was critical for his engagement in reform issues, as he studied, wrote, and talked about reforms and was exposed to the U.S. system as a point of reference."

Nearly everyone in Saakashvili's administration speaks English. His core of 20 or 30 close advisers is packed with Western-educated repatriates, including three other Muskie Fellows. "This is what official Tbilisi is like nowadays," notes Anna Politkovskaya, a columnist for the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. "American workaholic management, West-oriented management, no political unpredictability so typical of the Kremlin." But some overestimate the importance of an American model in Georgia, says Horton. "Saakashvili and his inner clique are far closer to Europe, and their models, and I would say he and most of the new leadership group, if I had to use one adjective, are very European about government reforms, and not American."

Whatever their sources, those reforms are finally being given a chance in Georgia: overhauling the police, the tax service, hiring, firing, and training practices. The government has reduced its payrolls and raised wages, and is trying to ensure a high degree of accountability. Saakashvili and other reform-minded Georgians with patriotic pangs have come home to help out, putting into action their classroom studies of elections and other democratic institutions. They readily admit a kind of inexperience. Indeed, they wear it with pride. "Because what kind of experience was it?" Saakashvili said to the *Washington Post* this past spring. "Experience at being corrupt. Experience at being part of the old system that didn't work."

"There's an army of young people on his team," Horton says, "the best and brightest of the country. During the Shevardnadze period, this clique had strong ideas about carrying out reforms. With Misha as president, they're able to."

Erin Arvedlund is the business correspondent for the New York Times's *Moscow bureau.*

Read more from ***Erin Arvedlund***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Erin Arvedlund***