

The US Role in Maturing Democracy in Georgia during the Pre-Election Period and After Parliamentary Elections of October 2012

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Abstract

After the parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 1, 2012, when the oppositional coalition named “Georgian Dream” led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, current prime minister of Georgia came to power with the significant majority, the whole world started to talk about the “Litmus Test” that Georgia passed with success in building its democracy. It was the first time in the history of independent Georgia when acting government was replaced with the opposition without revolutions and war. President Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement party became an opposition and commenced to act in “cohabitation” with the acting government.

Prime Minister Ivanishvili and his political team express their willingness to maintain the Euro-Atlantic course but at the same time underline the importance of regulating tensed relations and reestablish diplomatic ties with Russia. President Saakashvili and his followers blame existing government of being Russian-oriented and express their fears that Ivanishvili’s government is leading the country back to the “dark and cold 1990s” and back to the Russian rule.

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- 2) Will Georgia-US relations remain as ideal as they were during Saakashvili’s presidency?

Keywords: democracy, Georgia, parliamentary elections

After the parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 1, 2012, when the oppositional coalition named “Georgian Dream” led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, current prime minister of Georgia came to power with the significant majority, the whole world started to talk about the “Litmus Test” that Georgia passed with success in building its democracy. It was the first time in the history of independent Georgia when acting government was replaced with the opposition without revolutions and war. President Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement party became an opposition and commenced to act in “cohabitation” with the acting government. Yet the “cohabitation” process does not undergo the success as the President and Prime Minister have different visions of the country’s development and their adverse attitude towards each other is obvious for the society. Saakashvili’s course was strongly western-oriented and he never hid his hatred towards Russia and its government that lead the country to economic problems as Russia put embargo on Georgian products. Soon after, the August war in 2008 and South Ossetia’s occupation by Russia was followed. On the other hand Prime Minister Ivanishvili and his political team express their willingness to maintain the Euro-Atlantic course but at the same time underline the importance of regulating tensed relations and reestablish diplomatic ties with Russia. President Saakashvili and his followers blame existing government of being Russian-oriented and express their fears that Ivanishvili’s government is leading the country back to the “dark and cold 1990s” and back to the Russian rule.

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October 2011 can be freely called the awakening of opposition in Georgia. Starting from November 2003, when Mikheil Saakashvili came to power with his team via “Rose Revolution” – that forced Eduard Shevardnadze, formal USSR Foreign minister and later two term president of Georgia to leave his “throne”. United National Movement party received absolute majority in parliament and Mikheil Saakashvili was elected as a president. From that day on, the government has never had an opposition that he would recon with during decision-making process as existing opposition parties were too weak and were not able to gain people’s trust and support. In fact, the country led its political life as a one-party system. Despite the fact that several opposition parties tried to speak out loud about numeral serious mistakes being made by Saakashvili’s government besides a lot significant reforms that really was successful for the country’s development they never succeed to gain significant percentage of people’s trust. Many think and I agree that one of the main reasons opposition parties continual failure was unclear action plans and unpopular opposition leaders, who did so many mistakes in past that people did not trust them any more despite the fact that in many cases they were right.

People were somehow used to their destiny and definitely United National Movement party was again the single candidate who was predicted to win 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia when sudden information shackled fundamentally Georgia’s political life. In his open letter printed in one of the popular newspapers of Georgia “mysterious” Georgian businessmen, famous philanthropist and billionaire rating No. 229-th of Forbes Billionaires (Georgian News TV, 2013) who gained his wealth in Russia – Bidzina Ivanishvili expressed his will to come to power and openly opposed President Saakashvili and his team. He soon gained thousands of followers, managed to reunite several political parties whom he considered reliable (or he did not but did not have a big choice) under his political coalition named “Georgian Dream” and started active political campaign for coming to power in 2012 October elec-

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tions. It was the waking up of political life in Georgia.

The United States immediately realized that Georgia was on the edge of changes that would mean increasing of democracy quality in the country so it expressed full support of political processes. On January 30, 2013 the US president Barak Obama held a meeting with president Saakashvili in White House Oval Office. President Obama praised President Saakashvili for successful reforms he implemented in the country and thanked him for a “loyal contributor to the NATO mission to Afghanistan, when other countries, such as France, are declaring that they will pull out early and put a bigger burden on Washington.” (DFWATCH, 2012)

United States is strongly interested to keep stability in Georgia for numeral reasons. The second message President Obama stressed was “The possibility of a free trade agreement”. In his interview to Democracy & Freedom watch Tom de Waal, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace while evaluating the two presidents meeting said: “For the United States to take advantage of Russia’s WTO accession and for US businesses to trade with Russia under the new rules, Congress must repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment on trade with Russia. But there is a strong anti-Russia Republican contingent in Congress which will oppose repealing the amendment. Proposing a free trade agreement with Georgia is a good tactic to persuade these people in Congress to drop their objections.” According to him for the US President there was also a domestic political agenda in the meeting also. “Whoever is the Republican presidential candidate will inevitably try to accuse him of being “soft” on Russia because of his re-set policy, especially after Vladimir Putin is re-elected president in Russia in March. And, prior to this meeting, there might have been accusations about “betraying” Georgia. That is no longer possible and this meeting was a kind of pre-emptive strike on that issue.” (DFWatch, 2012)

“Anticipating fair and free elections”; “Formal transfer of power will solidify reforms” – these were the main messages for President Saakashvili. By these words President Obama made clear warning to President Saakashvili that in case he would try to remain in power like his rival Vladimir Putin did as Saakashvili’s opposition fared a lot; he would lose the support of the United States. By this President Obama declared that the United States of America was for Georgia and Georgian people’s choice and not for a single person or a single government.

Another step America took for supporting Georgia before the upcoming important elections was the appointment of a new ambassador. Ambassador Richard Norland is a Foreign Service veteran diplomat. The most important is that he served in 1993 as the U.S. representative and acting mission head on the CSCE Mission to Georgia, addressing conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He was even awarded for it “Department of State Superior Honor Award for his work in Georgia in 1993” (Embassy of the United States Georgia). “The US administration should monitor Georgia’s adherence to democratic principles and make sure that the financial assistance allocated to Georgia will contribute to the strengthening of civil society and rule of law in the country” – said Norland in his speech a week before the US Senate confirmed his candidacy. From the day of his appointment, September 10, 2012, Ambassador Norland was actively involved in Georgian political life like his predecessor. In September 28, 2013 he even attended opposition meeting in city Zugdidi, Samegrelo region as an accredited international

election observer to survey the pre-election situation and assess the media environment. After elections Ambassador Norland is an active supporter of cohabitation process and is trying to play a role of a negotiator between government and opposition. He openly condemned the violence caused by a violent crowd who tried to prevent the Georgian president to give a speech in National Parliament Library and physically assaulted several opposition political leaders on February 8, 2013.

During his visit in Washington DC in March 2013 Chairman of Georgia’s Parliament David Usupashvili expressed thankfulness towards American politicians who made a contribution for “protecting fledgling opposition and ensure that the will of the majority of Georgian people was not subverted”. “Our friends in the United States should rest assured that our determination to join both NATO and the European Union remains unchanged. We are in agreement with vital U.S. interests, including promoting security and stability in the Caucasus, exporting non-Russian controlled oil and gas from the Caspian, strengthening Europe’s integration and, above all, building a democratic model for post-Soviet states. Importantly, Georgia will remain the largest non-NATO provider of troops to the mission in Afghanistan and will train Afghan soldiers there after ISAF withdraws. Georgia will also serve as an essential transit point for U.S. troops and equipment leaving Afghanistan” – said Usupashvili in his speech with American officials. (Usupashvili, 2013) Though expressing thankfulness and declaring devotion for the western course was not the only reason that brought Usupashvili to the US. He asked for the help of American colleagues to assure President Saakashvili of signing constitutional changes new that government proposed. During street protests in 2009 President Saakashvili joked that if he were an opposition leader he would create numeral problems for the government. I don’t think in 2009 Saakashvili could predict the 2012 election case but this was the promise that Mr. President fulfilled excessively. The thing is that according to reforms enhanced in 2004 in Georgia’s constitution Georgia’s President had the power to dismiss the prime minister and his government and arbitrarily appoint a replacement without parliament’s approval and new elections. Georgia was the only democracy in the world where a head of state had this authority. Ivanishvili’s government attempted to change this amendment but President Saakashvili was procrastinating signing the amendment and his team in parliament was trying to bargain with parliament majority on several cases. This caused the fear in “Georgian Dream” coalition that the President was planning to discharge the government, though President several times openly declared that he was not planning doing this. “We hope to resolve this issue soon so we can focus all our energy on unlocking Georgia’s economic potential, but until we do, the dream of Georgia’s new democracy hangs in the balance” – said Usupashvili. This was somehow a promise to US government that in case US helped them to assure the president sign the amendment government and opposition would stop continual battles with each other and start working on the rise of democracy. I don’t know whether Usupashvili managed to assure American colleagues or not but soon after his arrival back to the homeland on March 21, 2013 Ambassador Norland visited the Georgian Parliament in Kutaisi and met with the members of the foreign relations Committee and members of civil society, he also held a discussion with parliamentarians. He individually met the Speaker D. Usupashvili and Minority Leader D. Bakradze. “Even in the midst of a lot of political dis-

cussion and debate,” Ambassador Norland said, “it’s important to remember how much progress Georgia has made. Georgia has now a strong new government with a popular mandate; it has strong opposition with a lot of experience; it has a strong parliament; it has an increasingly independent judiciary, and it has a very vibrant media. These all are very important fundamentals in the democratic process.” – commented the ambassador for the reporters. (Embassy of the United States Georgia, 2013) It is hard to guess the topic of discussion between the Ambassador and Georgian politicians behind closed door, but the fact is that on March 25th parliamentarians unanimously passed their first “constitutional amendment” removing the presidential power to appoint a new government without parliament’s approval. After much objection, the Georgian Dream coalition agreed to UNM’s request for a test vote beforehand, allowing the UNM to prove its indispensable role in the democratic process. That came after a bipartisan declaration on the country’s foreign policy orientation, which parliament adopted on March 7th. (Economist, 2013) The United States once again helped Georgia to make one more democratic step. According to the results presented by National Democratic Institute (NDI) 54 percent of respondents think that parliament was correct to pass a constitutional amendment which reduced the powers of the president so that he no longer has the right to personally appoint members of a caretaker government in the event that he decides to dismiss government and announce a new election. 12 percent were against the decision, while 31 don’t know. It means that by supporting this amendment the US helped lawmakers to fulfill peoples will.

Naming the facts will lead us too far. Georgia is trying to move on to its way to democracy and it really needs a serious help from the experienced democracies. Speaking about correctness or failure of Georgian people’s choice is too early as only seven months have passed and Presidential elections is still ahead. During the first years of Saakashvili’s presidency people truly admired him until he made several serious mistakes. At the moment, I as an ordinary citizen of Georgia cannot see the significant difference in political tactics of two governments, especially when we deal with the domestic policy. Poverty and unemployment still remain as the main problems of the country and still not a slight change is felt for overcoming this dilemma. In case the government will not resolve these problems at least partially, Georgian people will soon start to dislike Ivanishvili’s government too. The fact that Georgia begun exporting a few of its products to Russia can be considered as a success as some businessmen will truly benefit from this fact. Cultural sector representatives’ exchange is also very nice as people’s diplomacy matters a lot. Do we like it or not, Georgian and Russian people have strong ties between each other, they are intermarried, have kinship ties and so on. In case of isolation from Russia this ties maybe lost during the decades but at the moment it is impossible. Georgian and Russian people have many similarities in taste and realize that Georgia is not the part of Russia, that it is an independent, democratic country with Western-oriented political course and whether they like it or not we do have a right to make our own political choice. It will try its best to use all his leverages to gain its control over Georgia but he will not be able to ignore the international society’s attitude. European Union, NATO, The USA, EU and other western institutions are the ones whom Russia has to obey more or less. Their support is vitally important for Georgia as their democratic experience is the guideline for Georgia. Geor-

gian people have obviously declared their aspiration toward the Euro-Atlantic course and the government should obey the peoples’ will. Georgian people will not get used to any change of political course. Georgian people highly appreciate the support that United States provides for the country and by the current events they were convinced that the US does not support any single government but the Georgia and its way for maturing democracy. No one can predict what will happen in future but the facts show that Georgia is maintaining its western course and that US-Georgia partnership actively and successfully goes on.

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