



GEORGIA

POLITICAL LEGITIMACY
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DI IM--Post-Gamsakhurdia Georgia: The Crisis of Legitimacy



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Summary

Georgia remains mired in a crisis of political legitimacy, despite the recent creation of an interim government headed by former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Continued military rule in many regions of the country, infighting and maneuvering among rival political and paramilitary groups, ongoing ethnic problems, and lingering popular support for ousted President Gamsakhurdia are all factors contributing to the problem. A faltering economy and surging crime rate are further straining Georgia's political fabric. Acting Prime Minister Sigua's attempts to stem the crisis with proposed parliamentary elections, a series of political and economic reforms, and renewed economic contacts with the former Soviet republics and the West have thus far failed to stabilize the situation. Resistance to Shevardnadze's leadership among some political leaders and segments of the population and the limited prospects for holding successful parliamentary elections probably means continued political infighting and violence, adding to instability in the Caucasus.

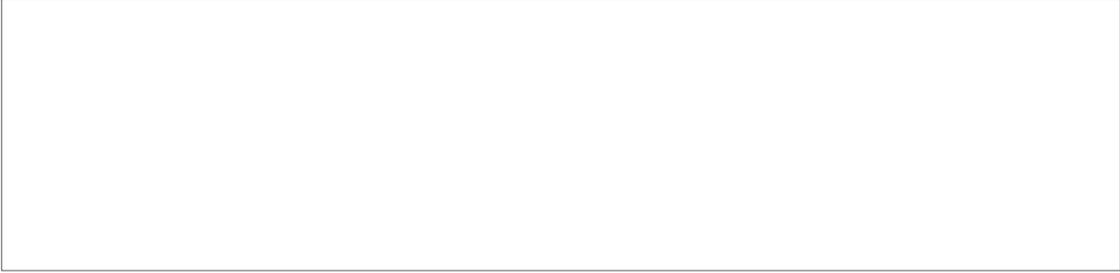
The ouster of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's first democratically elected president, in January 1992 has created a political vacuum and a crisis of legitimacy for the ruling interim government. This government--the State Council--is an outgrowth of the Military Council which drove out Gamsakhurdia and then seized power. After several unsuccessful attempts to reconvene parliament, the Military Council--comprised of former Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua, National Guard Commander Tengiz Kitovani, and paramilitary leader Jaba Ioseliani, the three leading opposition figures--first formed an advisory consultative council, comprised mainly of political and paramilitary leaders who helped overthrow Gamsakhurdia. When this effort failed to create a widely accepted civilian body, the Council in March tapped former Soviet Foreign Minister and Georgian Communist Party boss Eduard Shevardnadze to head a State Council, which would serve as an interim government. Shevardnadze's appointment was clearly an effort to break Georgia's international isolation, as key western states had refused to develop political and economic ties with the repressive Gamsakhurdia regime and remained cautious after its ouster. In addition, the members of the Military Council probably hoped Shevardnadze's outsider status might allow him to broker new parliamentary elections, originally slated for June.

Political Legacy of a Violent Overthrow

The interim government has not yet succeeded in its principal goal of restoring order in Tbilisi and western Georgia. Many Gamsakhurdia loyalists continue to resist the new Georgian government even though Gamsakhurdia fled the region following his aborted comeback attempt in January (see box). Although demonstrations have slowly receded in Tbilisi, both violent and non-violent acts of protest persist throughout western Georgia.

The Military Council attempted to reestablish order initially by placing these regions

under military rule. It established special curfews and banned the possession of unregistered firearms. Nevertheless, hostilities between forces loyal to the new government and local Gamsakhurdia loyalists have resulted in several recent deaths, including the assassination of several policemen and the burning alive of three Georgian National Guardsmen in March. [redacted]



Shevardnadze's return has intensified opposition to the interim government and created new political infighting within the leadership. Terrorist activity by Gamsakhurdia's supporters rose sharply following Shevardnadze's return and appointment as Chairman of the State Council. Shevardnadze remains a hated figure among Gamsakhurdia's supporters, despite recent polls ranking him as the most popular politician among Tbilisi residents. Demonstrators in western Georgia recently burned him in effigy. Some members of the State Council apparently feel threatened by Shevardnadze's political stature.



Several of the political and paramilitary factions which helped topple Gamsakhurdia are pursuing their own agendas at the expense of the interim government. Foremost among them is the Georgian National Congress party, led by Giorgi Chanturia. Perhaps the best known Georgian dissident in the West, Chanturia has held several press conferences in Tbilisi and Moscow at which he attempted to pass off his proposed policies as those of the new Georgian government. Chanturia, who is strongly opposed to Shevardnadze, also traveled recently to Spain in an effort to persuade [redacted] members of the exiled Georgian royal family to return to Tbilisi to help establish a constitutional monarchy. Members of the royal family rebuked Chanturia and publicly derided his visit as an exercise in self-promotion. [redacted]

Unresolved Issues

Apart from fending off pro-Gamsakhurdia forces and curtailing resurgent infighting within its ranks, the interim government faces several key tasks in its effort to restore stability; specifically, it must diffuse ethnic tensions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, define its relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States, and expand economic ties to the former Soviet republics and the West. [redacted]

Tensions between the new regime and the Ossetian and Abkhazian minority groups remain high despite the new State Council's stated desire of reaching peaceful settlements with all of Georgia's minorities. Sporadic Georgian-Ossetian fighting persists in the troubled South Ossetia region, serving as an irritant to Georgian-Russian relations. In January, shortly after Gamsakhurdia's ouster, the South Ossetians staged a referendum--although most of the voting took place in neighboring North Ossetia--that overwhelmingly backed a call for South Ossetia's incorporation into Russia. Meanwhile, nationalist leaders

in the western Abkhaz region have sought to preserve, if not enhance, their autonomy from Tbilisi. Abkhaz officials, however, face a dilemma. If they support the State Council they risk reprisals from Gamsakhurdia loyalists who dominate the region, while shunning cooperation with the State Council may invite military intervention. [redacted]

Relations with these ethnic groups will be aggravated by the interim government's decision to renew efforts to establish a Georgian military. While the leadership of the former Military Council views the establishment of military forces as necessary to consolidating power and safeguarding Georgian territory, the Ossetian and Abkhaz minorities see such forces as the chief threat to their autonomy. The new government has not yet confronted the dangerous task of disarming the numerous paramilitary groups in South Ossetia, but will likely come into conflict with them, as Gamsakhurdia did. [redacted]

The fate of former Soviet forces in Georgia also remains unresolved. Their relations with the Gamsakhurdia regime had been poor. [redacted]

[redacted] Since the ouster, the 100,000 CIS troops remaining in Georgia have had to defend themselves and their equipment against attacks from pro-Gamsakhurdia militants. Although relations between the new regime and CIS forces appear to have improved--Shevardnadze, in fact, has asked Russian President Yel'tsin not to withdraw Russian troops--it is unlikely that the interim government will be able to prevent continued harassment of CIS troops by local militants. It is also unclear whether Georgia will drop its claims to CIS weapons and equipment now that Gamsakhurdia is gone. Renewed calls for full control could cause a rift in relations with the CIS and, more importantly, Russia. [redacted]

Although the new government has also sought enhanced economic ties to the other former Soviet republics, it probably will refrain from joining the CIS, at least over the next several months. Shevardnadze probably favors Georgian membership in the CIS but appears to have abandoned this idea for now. Acting Prime Minister Sigua has told [redacted] the press, that he does not believe the CIS will survive long enough for a future Georgian Parliament to vote on applying for membership. [redacted]

Georgia is already taking steps to break its international isolation. Now that Georgia has made significant progress in gaining diplomatic recognition, it will continue to press the West for much needed foreign aid and investment. Shevardnadze is already spearheading such efforts, promising that democratic reforms will soon be in place. [redacted]

Elections--Key to Normalization

Because Gamsakhurdia won 87 percent of the vote in the 26 May 1991 Presidential election, the holding of new parliamentary elections is critical to resolving the crisis of legitimacy in Georgian politics. Acting Prime Minister Sigua proposed to hold elections in June, but many of Georgia's political factions have not yet agreed to participate. The State Council, without such support, faces divisive boycotts at the polls. The boycotts of the 1990 parliamentary elections which swept Gamsakhurdia's coalition into power spawned the opposition movement which later overthrew him. Many members of the consultative council--including Shevardnadze--believe that elections should be postponed until the fall and recent reports indicate this is the most likely outcome. To build support for new elections, the State Council will have to convince a large majority of Georgia's disparate political parties and factions that elections will not lead to the creation of a new authoritarian regime. Although the leaders

of the Council--excluding Shevardnadze--have promised to retire from political life after successful elections are held, many Georgians remain skeptical that they will give up power so easily. There have also been charges from some activists that the interim government is seeking to implement its own policies before elections in an effort to hamstring the policy options of any future government. [redacted]

Even if elections are held, the new leaders will face another major decision: what type of government to establish. Thus far, the State Council has not indicated what mechanism will be used to resolve this question, although some leaders have suggested holding a popular referendum. Members of the former Military Council had been unclear as to what form of permanent government they favored other than one which does not provide for a strong executive, if any executive at all. Proposals floated thus far range from a parliamentary democracy with or without a council of ministers, to a constitutional monarchy, to the return of Gamsakhurdia to power. The latter two proposals have foundered on the refusal of any member of the exiled royal family to return to Georgia from Spain and the categorical opposition of the new regime to consider allowing the return to power of Gamsakhurdia. As a last resort, the State Council might allow Gamsakhurdia to return to Georgia if he promised to eschew any political involvement, but Gamsakhurdia would be unlikely to accept this stricture. A parliamentary system would thus be the most likely form of government to emerge in Georgia. Nonetheless, many former opposition members fear that this would be a long transitional process, and that in the transition period Shevardnadze would position himself as the permanent de facto head of state. [redacted]

Prospects

The crisis of legitimacy in Georgian politics is unlikely to be resolved unless its myriad political and paramilitary groups put aside conflicting allegiances and objectives sufficiently to conduct new elections. Although Shevardnadze commands tremendous respect both at home and abroad, it is by no means clear that his reputation and political astuteness will enable him to draw Georgia's divided political forces into a democratic process. If he holds elections without securing the participation of Georgia's many political factions, the interim government will likely face boycotts, protests, and further violence. In addition, acts of terrorism or political assassination could quickly undermine the first steps toward stabilization. [redacted]

Moreover, success on the domestic front partly depends on Shevardnadze's ability to build productive economic ties with the other former Soviet republics, as well as the West. Shevardnadze will attempt to capitalize on recent Western recognition by seeking substantial economic aid for Georgia's beleaguered economy, arguing that such assistance is vital in his effort to promote stability and nail down a date for new elections. Substantial foreign aid, credits, and technical assistance might facilitate efforts to bridge some differences among the various political groups in Georgia--particularly if such assistance were tied to Georgia's commitment to hold new elections. [redacted]

If successful elections establishing some sort of ruling coalition are not held by year's end, Georgia may again plunge into widespread civil conflict and perhaps return to authoritarian rule. Many Georgians appear to be increasingly disillusioned with continued unrest, declining living standards, and the interim government's policies. Some Georgians have even begun calling for a strongman--although no political figure has been singled out--to assume control of the government and restore order [redacted] Continued political infighting and violence over the next six months could enhance the attractiveness of such sentiments to a weary populace, paving the way for a new Gamsakhurdia-style strongman. [redacted]

Appendix

STATE COUNCIL PRESIDUM

Eduard Shevardnadze (Chairman) age 64, returned to his native land with a mandate to use his considerable international contacts and expertise to lead Georgia out of isolation. He has met with success on some fronts, notably gaining diplomatic recognition from the West. His other priorities center on achieving domestic stability and encouraging economic growth. Shevardnadze is intent on attracting foreign investment and improving relations with other former Soviet republics, especially Russia. [redacted]

he is trying to bring adversaries together to alleviate ethnic tensions in the country. [redacted]

Shevardnadze is not without detractors, however. Some remember him unfavorably as Communist Party boss of the republic (1972-85); reports indicate he was the target of assassination attempts on several occasions. Others feel his six years in Moscow as Foreign Minister left him too wedded to the center and out of touch with Georgian politics. [redacted]

Jaba Ioseliani (Deputy Chairman), about age 65, is the most colorful member of the State Council. Dubbed "the charismatic former bank robber" by a Western newspaper for his criminal past, Ioseliani draws his power from his leadership of Georgia's best-armed private militia, the Mkhedrioni. He supported Shevardnadze's return in early 1992. [redacted]

After many years as a criminal (his record included bank robbery and about 25 years in jail), Ioseliani moved on to a career in drama and theater by the late 1960s. He is a playwright, critic, author, and has taught at the Tbilisi Theater Institute. [redacted]

Tengiz Sigua joined the crusade for Georgian independence in the late 1980s. He became a member of Gamsakhurdia's Roundtable-Free Georgia coalition, where he was a protege of Gamsakhurdia. When Gamsakhurdia became Chairman of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in November 1991, Sigua became Prime Minister. He resigned in August 1991, protesting his president's autocratic rule and economic mismanagement. He joined anti-Gamsakhurdia forces, where he became the choice of many to lead a government once Gamsakhurdia was ousted. [redacted]

As Acting Prime Minister, Sigua has focused on improving the country's economy. His Council of Ministers has issued decrees on land reform, rescinded a joint ventures tax, and in investigating measures on demonopolizing certain economic activities. A metallurgist by profession, Sigua is 58. [redacted]

Tengiz Kitovani has lost power and prestige in recent months. He had been co-leader of the ruling Military Council, but lost out when it was abolished in March. Kitovani also had headed Georgia's powerful National Guard, but stepped down in late February. He retained some authority by becoming First Deputy Prime Minister for security issues shortly thereafter. [redacted]

Kitovani was once an ally of Gamsakhurdia, with a friendship dating from childhood. He was elected to the Georgian Supreme Soviet in 1990, and was appointed to head [redacted]

the National Guard at its inception in mid-1991. Kitovani and many of his troops fled Tbilisi later that year in protest of Gamsakhurdia's actions, and formed one of the core groups in the effort to overthrow the president. Kitovani, a well-known sculptor, is about 55 years old. [redacted]

Gamsakhurdia's Government in Exile

Members of the opposition and disaffected Gamsakhurdia allies--including former senior government officials and elements of the Georgian National Guard had joined forces following the failed August 1991 Moscow coup to demand Gamsakhurdia's resignation. After several months of street demonstrations and sporadic fighting, forces loyal to the opposition coalition laid siege to the Georgian Parliament building where Gamsakhurdia had taken refuge in late December. Gamsakhurdia then fled to Armenia after two weeks of intense fighting left several hundred dead and much of Tbilisi's historic quarter destroyed. He attempted to rally supporters by briefly returning to western Georgia in late January but soon withdrew to Checheno-Ingushetiya, where he remains in exile.

Since fleeing western Georgia for Grozny, Checheno-Ingushetiya in late January, Gamsakhurdia has appealed to the international community to deny recognition to the "illegal" Shevardnadze-led State Council. In mid-March Gamsakhurdia convened a meeting in Grozny of 70 of the 134 deputies of the former Georgian Parliament in an effort to establish a government in exile. Aside from issuing a pro forma condemnation of the new State Council, the deputies have done little to help Gamsakhurdia in his bid to return to power. Chechen President Dudayev--united with Gamsakhurdia by a mutual hatred of Russia--has provided Gamsakhurdia asylum as well as the limited resources needed for continued political agitation.

This box is ~~Confidential~~ [redacted]

Growing Economic Costs of the Crisis

The near total breakdown of Georgia's economy has exacerbated the political crisis. [redacted] that fuel shortages have paralyzed most Georgian heavy industry and transportation. His acting finance minister has stated that 80 percent of industrial enterprises are standing idle. Prices in the local markets have skyrocketed, making most goods unaffordable for the average consumer despite a 100 percent increase in government salaries [redacted]. In addition, the interim government's attempts at radical economic reform are contributing to the turmoil. The decision to free prices on basic foodstuffs has met with consumer anger, while efforts toward privatization of Tbilisi apartment blocks has generated confusion among most tenants.

Georgia's political crisis and battered economy have given rise to an explosion of criminal activity. Crime in Tbilisi has risen dramatically since Gamsakhurdia's ouster. [redacted] Armed robbery and car "kidnappings"--gangs stealing cars and then offering to return them if a ransom is paid--are increasingly common. Few people venture out after dark fearing that militiamen are just as likely to perpetrate a violent crime as to prevent one. After Gamsakhurdia's overthrow, an official amnesty freed 4,200 petty criminals, despite protests from the police. Drug abuse is also on the rise.

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