



USSR

Zviad GAMSAKHURDIYA
GAMSAKHURDIYA

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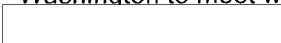
LR Article: *Georgia's Colorful and Controversial New President*

Zviad Gamsakhurdiya's overwhelming victory in Georgia's first direct presidential election in May 1991 further consolidated his grip on power, strengthening his hand in high-stakes games with opponents in the republic and at the Soviet center. In addition to greater political legitimacy, the presidency provides Gamsakhurdiya with far-ranging powers, including the right to veto parliamentary legislation. He sees the election results as a ringing endorsement of his policies, especially his approach to the issue of independence; he has indicated he will use the political momentum afforded by the election and the 31 March popular referendum on independence to complete the republic's separation from the union.



Instant Agenda

Gamsakhurdiya wasted no time setting his presidential agenda. At a press conference shortly after the results of the May election were announced, he declared that his first priorities included ensuring Georgia's independence, seeking international recognition of Georgia as an independent state, establishing closer contacts with the five other republics that did not sign the nine-plus-one agreement{1} on 23 April, and strengthening relations with Western countries. He also indicated that he hoped to meet soon with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to discuss Georgia's campaign and to travel to Washington to meet with President Bush and elicit US support for Georgia's independence.



1-The nine-plus-one agreement was signed by Gorbachev and the leaders of nine Soviet republics (Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Azerbaijan, and the five Central Asian republics) in April. Under the accord, Gorbachev agreed to grant the republics greater political and economic power in exchange for their support for the center's stabilization measures and their pledge to sign a new union treaty soon.



Supporters Overjoyed, Opponents Downcast

An ardent nationalist and former political prisoner, Gamsakhurdiya enjoys widespread support among both the general population in Georgia and, perhaps more important, its new political elite. Members of his Round Table coalition--which, along with the National Congress coalition, comprises the majority of Georgia's nationalist political groups--swept to power in legislative elections in late 1990, and Gamsakhurdiya was elected republic Supreme Soviet chairman shortly thereafter. In April the Georgian legislature created an executive presidency--for which Gamsakhurdiya had lobbied energetically, arguing that the center was working with his enemies to undermine his government--and unanimously elected him interim president.



His family

background--his father was one of the republic's most beloved novelists--has also contributed to Gamsakhurdiya's success: [redacted] Georgians associate the family name with the republic's history and tradition and feel comfortable putting their destiny in Gamsakhurdiya's hands. [redacted]

Authority Within Republic

Although under recently passed legislation the Georgian Supreme Soviet can impeach Zviad Gamsakhurdiya with the votes of three-quarters of its membership, the new president--who served as its chairman from November 1990 to April 1991--has the current legislature firmly under his control. The body unanimously elected him to serve as interim president after creating the post last April and then elected Gamsakhurdiya's protege and former first deputy, Akakiy Asatiani, as his successor. [redacted]

While Gamsakhurdiya's supporters are rejoicing in his election and in the boost they feel it has given to the republic's independence drive, critics argue that his victory represents a step back for democracy and warn of a return to authoritarianism and repression. They also accuse the Georgian president of instigating a personality cult rivaling that of Stalin. An opponent who has said he fears that Gamsakhurdiya will bring civil war to the republic has compared the President to the hero in a Chinese legend who slays the dragon only to become the dragon himself. [redacted]

Gamsakhurdiya's critics point to his record as republic Supreme Soviet chairman as cause for concern. During his tenure Gamsakhurdiya:

- o Showed little tolerance for either his political opponents--in particular the National Congress and its supporters--or Georgia's ethnic minorities.
- o Subordinated the mass media to government control.
- o Introduced a system of local government that gave extensive powers to local prefects appointed by and answerable to him.
- o Proposed but later amended--as the result of much criticism--an onerous citizenship law that would have restricted republic citizenship and property ownership to those whose ancestors settled in Georgia before 1801.

At his first postelection press conference, the new president did little to enhance his image as a committed democrat when he ordered a reporter from the US-sponsored Radio Liberty news service--which he has accused of being, along with the Wall Street Journal, "an instrument of the Kremlin"--to leave the gathering and subsequently called the journalist a provocateur. [redacted]

Most alarmed by Gamsakhurdiya's chauvinism is the republic's non-Georgian population, particularly the South Ossetians, whose campaign for autonomy in the past several months has resulted in violent unrest, creating a serious public relations problem for the Georgian leadership. Gamsakhurdiya has claimed that South Ossetia is a "Bolshevik invention" and has frequently referred to Ossetians and their leaders as "criminals and traitors"; he insists that he has been forced to take exceptionally harsh measures against them because they are in league with Soviet authorities. Although his strong

stand enjoys broad public support, Gamsakhurdiya now appears to be softening his rhetoric, probably in an attempt to overcome negative publicity abroad. On 23 April, for example, he claimed that the only way to reach a democratic solution in South Ossetia was to hold a referendum among Georgian residents of Ossetian nationality on the question of reconstructing their autonomous oblast, which was officially abolished in December 1990. [redacted]

Rocky Relations With the Center

Gamsakhurdiya has been among the staunchest of republic leaders in rebuffing attempts by the center to keep the present union intact. Stressing that he will not allow Moscow to dupe Georgia as he alleges it has the Baltic states, Gamsakhurdiya has repeatedly warned the center that if it attempts to repress the Georgian independence movement with force--as it did in Latvia and Lithuania last January--he will call for a popular uprising. [redacted]

[redacted] Gamsakhurdiya has indicated on several recent occasions that he wants to discuss how to peacefully resolve relations between Georgia and the center, telling TASS on 18 May, for example, that positive changes were under way and "points of contact have been found" on some issues. He continues to insist, nevertheless, that talks between the two sides should be conducted as between two countries, not between a republic and the union government. He has rejected the idea of Georgia's signing any union treaty and has categorically dismissed the nine-plus-one agreement. [redacted]

Although Gamsakhurdiya has in the past been openly contemptuous of Gorbachev, he now appears to be trying to downplay their differences. In interviews last fall and earlier this year, he argued that Gorbachev was carrying on the imperialist tradition of Lenin and Stalin and credited the United States, not Gorbachev, with perestroika.

Relations With Other Republic Leaders

Gamsakhurdiya is trying to improve Georgia's relations--particularly its economic ties--to the other Soviet republics as well as his own relationship with other republic leaders. He has promoted a closer alliance among the republics in the Caucasus, for example, and recently offered to serve as mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. [redacted]

[REDACTED]

Angling for an invitation to the United States Gamsakhurdiya and his supporters are currently laying the groundwork for a proposed visit to the United States. Although initial indications were that Gamsakhurdiya hoped to travel to the United States and meet with President Bush this summer--his foreign minister discussed the possibility of such a meeting during his trip to Washington in early June--recent reports suggest that the Georgians are now hoping for a visit this fall. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Gamsakhurdiya's opponents are alarmed by his plans to visit the United States. They warn that the main objective of his proposed trip is public relations and maintain that he has skillfully manipulated recent visits by US officials to give the impression that the US Government supports him. [REDACTED]

The Economy and Prime Minister Sigua

Zviad Gamsakhurdiya is aggressively pursuing economic ties to other Soviet republics and several foreign nations. He insists that the Soviet Union has intentionally isolated Georgia from world economic processes and that the Georgian economic situation will improve when it is no longer isolated. Gamsakhurdiya, who has no real background in economic decision making, advocates a rapid transition to a market economy and recognizes that Georgia must restructure its economy in order to attract Western investment. [REDACTED]

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