

Black Roses: When Reformers Fall Out -
Georgia's Transition from 'People Power' to Caucasian Cockpit

by

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“Georgia has made stunning progress in carrying out substantial economic, judicial and state reforms... that should allow Georgia to become a prosperous liberal market economy and a fully-fledged democracy governed by human rights and the rule of law. Georgia has set an example for the whole region and beyond.”

Council of Europe rapporteurs Matyas Eorsi & Kastriot Islami
(13 September 2007)¹

“The style of Saakashvili's governance ... has made dishonesty, injustice and oppression a way of life. Everyday repression, demolition of houses and churches, robbery, 'kulakization', and murders, I would stress, *murders*, have become common practice for the authorities.”

Ex-Defence Minister Irakli Okruashvili in Tbilisi
(25th September, 2007)²

On Friday 2nd November, 2007, the centre of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, was occupied a huge crowd demanding the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili.³ It was exactly four years since Saakashvili had cried foul about Georgia's parliamentary elections and set in train the protests which brought him to power on 23rd November, 2003. While Western media have largely ignored the tail-spin in the popularity of Georgia's arch-populist, the waves of criticism and protest denouncing the erstwhile hero of the so-called “Rose Revolution” take place against the sensitive geo-strategic backdrop of Georgia's dispute with Russia over the status of its breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Whether the protests peter out or achieve their stated goal of forcing early elections, the myth of People Power has been tarnished once more by the reality of the power struggles and back-stabbing among yesteryear's “reformers”.

The current crisis in Georgia began when the two leading figures in the “Rose Revolution”, Mikheil Saakashvili and Irakli Okruashvili had a spectacular falling out. Having served as Prosecutor-General purging supporters of the ousted president Eduard Shevardnadze and then as Defence Minister, Irakli Okruashvili, dramatically left Saakashvili's government in November, 2006. After ten months of public silence, on 25th September, 2007, Mr Okruashvili announced he was launching a “Movement for a United Georgia”.

¹ See Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), “Stunning Progress Achieved in Georgia is an Example for the Whole Region and Beyond” (19th September, 2007): <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Press/StopPressView.asp?ID=1958>.

² See “Irakli Okruashvili's Speech at the Presentation of His Party” in *Civil Georgia* (25th September, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15862>.

³ Le Monde put it at 70,000. See <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3214,36-974149@51-628857,0.html>.

At the press conference launching his challenge to President Saakashvili, Okruashvili declared, "I want to tell you... recent developments in the country, the fascist tendencies and the steps taken by the authorities against the Georgian state, have made us [the new political party] come together before the public in this team..." Then he declared, "The style of Saakashvili's governance, which has gone beyond the limits, has made dishonesty, injustice and oppression a way of life. Everyday repression, demolition of houses and churches, robbery, 'kulakization', and murders, I would stress, murders, have become common practice for the authorities."⁴

Such as the shock effect that it was only two days later, after launching his new opposition party with this litany of charges against his former long-time political ally and personal friend, President Mikheil Saakashvili, that Irakli Okruashvili was arrested and taken to Tbilisi's notorious *Isolator* Number 7, the scene of well-documented torture of political prisoners since 1991. After he had recanted his charges against the President but confessed to his own crimes in a video session with interrogators but without his lawyer present, Mr Okruashvili posted bail of US\$6 million and was released.⁵

At the same time as the former top two of Georgia's "Rose Revolution" in 2003 were at each others' throats making blood curdling threats and accusations, events in Burma were being reported with same kind of naïve enthusiasm for "People Power" which has left a bitter taste in the mouths of impoverished and oppressed Georgians. They have twice experienced coups d'état (in 1991 and 2003) lauded in the West as expressions of the will of the people. Even as Okruashvili and Saakashvili traded accusations of murder and treason in Tbilisi, Georgia's revolution in 2003 was actually been cited as a model by Western media for the saffron-robed monks of Burma protesting against the military government there.⁶

Only people bewitched by the myth of "People Power" could think that given Georgia's disillusionment any good come from another coloured-coded revolution endorsed by the same journalists and "human rights" activists who have praised Georgia as a model for change. Many of the Western groups who funded and trained the so-called "rose revolutionaries" in Georgia in 2003 have been behind the scenes of the "saffron revolution" in Burma. If Burma's military rulers should go the way of Eduard Shevardnadze will Burma fall through the floor into the same politics of corruption, drugs smuggling and backstabbing which have pock-marked Georgia's tragic post-Soviet history.

Proponents of "People Power" from the Caucasus to South-East Asia ignore the poverty, oppression, disease and death which have followed events like the "Rose Revolution." Western media like *The Economist* and so-called human rights watchdogs like the Council of Europe have a lamentable record of fellow travelling with successive corrupt and cruel regimes in Tbilisi since 1991. It is not too much to say that there isn't any bad situation which the nexus of Western intelligence agencies, media and human rights agencies cannot make worse, while singing their own praises as the proponents of a new dawn of human happiness.

The infighting and mutual accusations of crime, corruption and killings among the Rose Revolutionaries is the starkest case yet of the reality of a post-People Power country contrasting with the myth peddled abroad in the Western media. No journalists who painted a rosy picture of the new rulers of Georgia has yet come forward to correct, let alone apologise for their myth-making under the guise of reporting.

⁴ See Civil Georgia, "Okruashvili's Speech at the Presentation of His Party" (25th September, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15862>.

⁵ See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Georgian Ex-minister Withdraws Saakashvili Allegations" (8th October, 2007): <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/10/05E8BAC8-8624-4CF4-8DB2-BEFD2BF0936C.html>

⁶ CNN International, for instance, ignored the Georgian crisis though it aired adverts for "Invest in Georgia" with its slogan "The Winner is Georgia" including on 2nd November, 2007.

When friends fall out: Mikheil Sakashvili & Irakli Okruashvili

“Georgia has produced strong leaders. Stalin, Beria, Gamsakhurdia. Even Shevardnadze, before he got addicted to power. They looked beyond Georgia. My husband does the same; he fits in the tradition. This country needs a strong hand. It is incredibly important that respect for authority returns... I think my husband is the right person to frighten people.”

Sandra Roeloffs aka Mrs. Mikheil Saakashvili⁷

“After the revolution, the spring cleaning... Every week has brought fresh arrests of the great and not so good... The whole country is being treated to this televised humiliation, directed personally by the new prosecutor-general... He is also planning further arrests.”

Tim Whewell, “Newsnight”, *BBC2* (8th April, 2004)

“This is what official Tbilisi is like nowadays: American workaholic management, West-oriented management, no political unpredictability so typical of the Kremlin.”

Anna Politkovskaya⁸

They were buddies. Blood brothers. Soul-mates in the fight for democracy against corruption. Every authoritative voice – *The Economist*, *New York Times*, *the BBC*, even the martyred Anna Politkovskaya – assured us that Mikheil Saakashvili and Irakli Okruashvili were the best and brightest hopes for an end to the post-Soviet quagmire of corruption and political in-fighting. So how did it all go wrong?

Readers can be forgiven not knowing that it has all gone wrong. For instance, the BBC reporters who filed successive upbeat stories about the Saakashvili-Okruashvili double have fallen strangely silent when it comes to accounting for their spectacular bust-up.

BBC2's *Newsnight*'s Tim Whewell used never to tire of telling us about Irakli Okruashvili's dynamism as prosecutor: “another day, more arrests” which “doesn't leave the chief corruption buster with much time for his wife and daughter.” Considering the prosecutor and the president, he assured viewers less than four years ago – admittedly an age ago in media memory – they were “the youngest, most photogenic government in the world...” Apparently photogenic equalled public spirited in Whewell-speak.⁹

In America, too, regime-friendly journalists emphasised the new order's youth as if it equalled a moral quality. Saakashvili's regime was a kind of Camelot in the Caucasus according to the *Washington Post*'s Peter Baker who gushed about the new class ruling Georgia in 2004:

⁷ Quoted by Richard W. Carlson, “Georgia on his Mind. George Soros's Potemkin Revolution” in *The Weekly Standard* ix, 35 (24th May, 2004): <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/004/104ygtvi.asp%3Fpg%3D2+Stalin+Saakashvili+Beria&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&ie=UTF-8>. For the original Dutch version, see the weekly “HP/De Tijd” (6th February 2004), 27. I am grateful to Maarten Doude van Troostwijk for this reference.

⁸ See Erin Arvedlund, “Rose Revolutionary” in *Columbia Magazine* (Winter, 2005): <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Winter2005/saakashvili.html>.

⁹ See Tim Whewell's report on BBC2 “Newsnight” (8th A

⁹ See Tim Whewell's report on BBC2 “Newsnight” (8th April, 2004).

“Saakashvili has built the former Soviet Union's first generation of leaders outside the historically Western-oriented Baltic republics, a team whose members look like him -- in their thirties, Western-educated, untainted by the old system.” Taking his argument from Saakashvili himself, Baker quoted the new President , "Absence of experience is an asset in itself. Because what kind of experience was it? Experience at being corrupt. Experience at being part of the old system that didn't work.”¹⁰

Georgians have a long history of gulling gullible journalists. After all fellow traveling was invented by hacks hanging on Stalin's every word, but any anthropologist or sociologist would point out that young people are the most socialised to the dominant system. It is all they have known. In this case it is all their parents and grandparents knew and served. Far from representing an automatic break with Soviet behavioural norms in Georgia, Saakashvili and his generation exemplified the way Sovietised Georgians operated within a patronage system dominated by a distant all-powerful boss. Shevardnadze saw the sun rise in Moscow “where Lenin lies”, Saakashvili sees the sun rise in the West in Washington. Both Shevardnadze and his erstwhile apprentice know how to utter the slogans of the patron while running their satrapy as usual. Sadly, Georgians expect that, and are certainly adapted to mouthing grand principles while doing dirty deals.

Gori gets a Bad Reputation

“Today I'm traveling with the deputy governor of this province, Vasil Makherashvili, who's personally masterminding a sting operation in a neighboring town that started off from a complaint on the hotline. I should say that Vasil isn't exactly what you might think a deputy governor would look like. He's only 26. He comes from a non-governmental organization that specifically existed to monitor corruption. He's a very broad-shouldered young man in a standard black leather jacket and jeans.”

Tim Whewell of the BBC

“Misha Karelli, the 28-year-old governor in Gori. He's entertaining me at a sumptuous feast. I must say, it's hard not to be charmed by Georgia's new rulers. You don't often find such honesty and idealism among leaders in this part of the world. The Georgian government is so overwhelmingly popular. You can see it might be tempted to misuse its authority. But I'm more worried that its goal of ending corruption is simply too ambitious.”

Tim Whewell of the BBC¹¹

Celebrated in the Soviet-era as Stalin's birthplace – with a magnificent museum to enshrine the city's most (in)famous son's first home – Gori has played a symbolic role in Georgian politics since independence. Both in 1995 and again in 2000 Eduard Shevardnadze chose the city as the launch-pad for his presidential election campaigns. In November, 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili's stormtroopers assembled at the foot of the largest standing statue of Stalin in the world before setting out on their “bloodless” assault on the Georgian Parliament in Tbilisi.

It wasn't only the BBC's Whewell who swooned at the sight of so much leather and six o'clock shadow fighting crime. Theresa Freeze of the neo-conservative bastion of Caucasus studies,

¹⁰ See Peter Baker, “Building a Democracy” in *The Washington Post* (22nd May, 2004), which pleased the Saakashvili regime so well it was placed on the official website:

<http://www.georgiaemb.org/DisplayMedia.asp?id=341>

¹¹ Both quotations from BBC2 “Newsnight” (8th April, 2004).

Johns Hopkins, quoted Misha Kareli declaring, ““Shida Kartli has been the region most active in combating corruption.”¹²

But now it has all gone wrong.

As early as June, 2005, newspapers reported that smuggled goods were being sold in Shida Kartli shops owned by the governor’s family.¹³ By September, 2005, a journalist was badly beaten after filing reports which implicated the governor in smuggling.¹⁴ Although Western media like *The Economist* and CIA-endorsed outfits like the *Jamestown Foundation* attribute all the smuggling in the Gori region to the neighbouring breakaway province of South Ossetia, local school children know that smuggling is inherently trans-boundary and therefore it takes at least two to smuggle. It seems from the current charges that the big profiteers were on Georgian-controlled soil among Georgian officials (as before 2003).

After Okruashvili disappeared into Tbilisi’s No7 prison, Vasil Makharashvili was arrested along with Misha Kareli and other members of what the government prosecutors alleged was a mafia group involved in smuggling and other organized crime activities as well as bribe-taking centred on Gori.¹⁵ It may well be that their support for Irakli Okruashvili’s new party was their greatest crime in the eyes of the Saakashvili political clan, but the dewy-eyed Western media which had portrayed the leather-jacketed Gori boys as Galahad’s of the struggle for democracy and honest government surely owe their readers and viewers an explanation.

Just as the Western media once swooned over Shevardnadze and his crooked crew before discovering that, one by one, they were mafiosi and oligarchs, so now Saakashvili’s most intimate allies from the Rose Revolution are being exposed as crooks, smugglers and embezzlers. It is a kind of poor man’s version of Stalin’s purge of his ex-comrades among the Old Bolsheviks of 1917

Silence has replaced this kind of reportage: “Ten o’clock at night but that’s still early in the prosecutor-general’s working day and we’re still on the move. An hour later we’ve arrived in Gori where Irakli [sic.] was first governor after the revolution, another pal aged 28, a former anti-corruption campaigner is his replacement.”¹⁶ Back in spring, 2004, Whewell followed the Eliot Ness of the Caucasus on his nocturnal purge: “Until recently in Georgia a visit from men in masks probably meant you were about to be kidnapped but now it’s just the police...!” But in this case, it was the arrest of “a prominent MP said to be linked to organised crime.” In words dripping with cruel irony today, Whewell gloated about Okruashvili’s public degradation of a political opponent: “The while country is being treated to this televised humiliation directed personally by the new prosecutor general... This after all is what the revolution was for.”

Tim Whewell’s breathless report about Okruashvili’s crackdown on smuggling in Gori in April, 2004, showed the racket-boosters with “their ultimate democratic weapon – a hidden camera” and followed Vasil Makharashvili who was in charge of the “sting” operation. Makharashvili takes the incriminating video to his boss, Okruashvili who “is cool as ever but clearly pleased.” It is a “victory for the new honest Georgia”. Now, not only has Okruashvili been accused of the economic crimes which he was prosecuting but even his “pal”, the “former anti-corruption campaigner,” Makharashvili, was arrested for the same abuses of office.

¹² See Theresa Freese, “Security, governance and Economic Reform in Shida Kartli” in *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* (19th May, 2004): http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=2413

¹³ See “Charges from the ‘Right’ – Smuggling continues in Shida Kartli” in *24 Hours* (16th June, 2005): <http://www.24hours.ge/index.php?n=264&r=1&id=1523>

¹⁴ See *Reporters without Borders* (9th September, 2005): http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=14929

¹⁵ See e.g.

www.mediascrape.com/News/ViewNewsItem.aspx?newsItemId=32884&rootVideoPanelType=1.

¹⁶ See Tim Whewell, “Newsnight” *BBC2* (8th April, 2004).

In his days of unbridled power, Okruashvili told the BBC the meaning of the Rose revolution in November, 2003. Those who did not understand “what is happening in November have lost their jobs.” Even Whewell admitted that the idea that “failure to understand the meaning of the revolution has a slightly ominous sound in Gori. This is the home town of a man who turned informing into a patriotic duty. Stalin is still revered here as nowhere else in the world. He stands guard now over a pioneering experiment which encourages Georgians to turn informer again.”¹⁷

Briefly, even Whewell interviewed a critical local journalist who had a muck-raking programme on Rustavi-2 before 2003. Banned at the end of Shevardnadze’s regime – and its banning was one of the charges against Shevardnadze’s rule - Akaki Gogichaishvili’s programme was not resumed under Saakashvili and he told Whewell, “I am not very confident about democracy maintaining in this country.”

But such was the buzz of photogenic prosecuting activity that these warning words were soon forgotten. So much of the Western media followed suit. It was cool to condemn first and arrest afterwards. When he was still Saakashvili’s “iron fist”, Okruashvili like his boss was repeatedly quoted demanding people be imprisoned. On 4th January, 2005, he named four officials of the Defence Ministry in a press conference and declared, “I want to see these people in jail within a month.”¹⁸

Within three years, Okruashvili found himself peremptorily in jail.

Who decided on the arrest of Okruashvili so soon after he established an opposition party?

President Saakashvili is clear that there is a separation of powers in Georgia. When he was asked in mid-October on RenTV whether he had ordered the arrest of his “old friend” Okruashvili, Saakashvili roundly declared, “I don’t issue such orders, I have never done so, nor will ever do. In our country such issues are decided on the basis of supremacy of law. Very often I learn news from television, this is very normal.” But other evidence suggest that Mr Saakashvili’s years studying the US constitution at Columbia did not clarify the separation of powers quite as much as he suggests. When Ilan Greenberg of the *New York Times* interviewed the Georgian President in 2004, he recorded an interruption to their conversation: “On the phone, Saakashvili hesitated for just a moment and then shouted, ‘To jail!’ and slammed down the receiver.”¹⁹

Controlling the courts has been a central part of Saakashvili’s “reforms”. When ex-Supreme Court Justice Tamar Laliashvili refused to resign to make way for a crony of the president, even though offered her salary for the next ten years, she was accused of taking bribes and sacked – or so she claims. Laliashvili is waiting for the European Court of Human Rights to hear her case.²⁰

Immediately after the Okruashvili purge began, President Saakashvili announced on 4th October that “I have taken the decision to create an anticorruption group answering only to the

¹⁷ The Rose revolution was in fact launched from the foot of Stalin’s statue in Gori by Mikheil Saakashvili and his “pals”, but the symbolism of the departure point for their Mussolini-style “March on Tbilisi” is lost on Western journalists.

¹⁸ See Jean-Christoph Peuch, “What’s Behind Defense Minister’s Fraud Charges?” *RFE/RL* (6th January, 2005): <http://www.kvali.com/kvali/index.asp?obiektivni=show&n=242>

¹⁹ See Marianna Makisimovskaya, “Georgian President saddened by frozen relations with Russia” *RenTV* (13th October, 2007): <http://www.eurasianet.org/posts/101507ru.shtml>, & Ilan Greenberg, “The Not-So-Velvet Revolution” in the *New York Times Magazine* (.30th May, 2004): http://www.ncsj.org/AuxPages/053004NYT_Saak.shtml.

²⁰ See Manfred Quiring, “Der Glanz des Reformers Saakaschwili ist verblasst” in *Die Welt* (2nd October, 2006): http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article156932/ Der_Glanz_des_Reformers_Saakaschwili_ist_verblasst.html.

president.”²¹ This seemed again to show that acting as prosecutor, judge and jury comes naturally to the Columbia and Strasbourg-trained human rights lawyer of yesteryear. The President’s dissident former foreign minister, Salome Zurbashvili pointed out that Mr Saakashvili’s intensification of his rhetorical attack on corruption eerily recalls the fin-de-regime of his predecessor: “Shevardnadze established the anti-corruption commission in the period of his regime’s sunset.”²²

Whatever Mr Okruashvili’s faults – and how a young man with a long career in Georgia’s notoriously badly-paid public service could find six million dollars to post bail is a mystery – his real crime was threatening to challenge Mikheil Saakashvili in next year’s presidential elections. Precisely because Okruashvili knows how presidents are really made in Georgia²³, his entry into opposition to Saakashvili was deeply sinister for the sitting president. The current purge atmosphere in Georgia combined with heightened nationalist hysteria with regularly staged spats with Russia over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia seems to be the opening salvo in Mr Saakashvili’s re-election campaign, or maybe it is just his survival strategy.

The Trail of Bodies, or How the Caucasus Knot Tightened

“I am not saying that Zhvania was murdered, but what I can say at this point is that Zhvania’s corpse was actually brought into the flat where it was apparently discovered.”

Irakli Okruashvili²⁴

Every “People Power” revolution has had its murder mystery from the shooting of Benigno Aquino on his return to Manila in August, 1983, via the “student” allegedly beaten to death by the Czechoslovak police on 17th November, 1989 who turned out to be a Communist secret police agent, the spate of kidnappings and killings in Serbia which culminated on 12th March, 2003, with the martyrdom of the anti-Milošević premier Zoran Djindjić at the hands of a para-military who had helped him to power on 5th October, 2000, to the as yet unsolved poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine in September, 2004. Yet the official explanations of the death of Prime Minister, Zurab Zhvania, due to a gas leak while paying a late-night visit to the apartment of a young male friend in Tbilisi on 3rd February, 2005, never convinced many people in Georgia that Zhvania’s death was an accident.²⁵

When Okruashvili accused the Saakashvili regime of murder, embezzlement, intimidation and fraud, he also attacked the man regarded by many observers as the true power behind

²¹ See “Georgia’s Saakashvili Vows to Fight Graft”, *Javno* (4th October, 2007): <http://www.javno.com/en/world/clanak.php?id=86992>.

²² See “Opposition Slams Saakashvili” in *The Georgian Times* (5th October, 2007): <http://www.geotimes.ge/index.php?m=home&newsid=7097>

²³ An even younger Okruashvili worked in the Georgian Central Election Commission in 1995 when it validated Shevardnadze’s election as president. Two weeks before that stitch-up I pointed out that the boxes containing the tens of thousands of signatures endorsing Shevardnadze’s nomination contained blanks below the top sheet. Britain’s Foreign Office denounced me as biased. The Soros-funded *Transitions* (now on-line) which has yet to report on the Saakashvili-Okruashvili bust up, carried Jeremy Druker, “War of the Monitors” in *Transitions* (February, 1999), 14-21, repeating the FO’s false claim that my visit was funded by it when I was in Georgia for the Norwegian Helsinki Committee knowing that Whitehall backed Shevardnadze blindly. My real crime in the eyes of British diplomats may have been reporting that the wife of a Georgian Mafioso in Jaba Ioseliani’s Mkhedrioni gang was a secretary in the British embassy and that the drugs-and-people smuggling racketeers intended to make good use of that!

²⁴ See “Okruashvili Ups Ante on Former Allies” *Civil Georgia* (26th September, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15869>.

²⁵ See this Group’s “Georgia: Power Cut” (February, 2005): <http://www.bhhrg.org/CountryReport.asp?CountryID=10&ReportID=242>

Saakashvili's throne. Among other things, Okruashvili accused Gigi Bokeria of destroying a church for gain. Mr Bokeria is at the heart of the inner circles of the global People Power enterprise. He was the Rose Revolutionary who ran the Soros-funded *Liberty Institute* and organised the *Kmara (Enough)* youth movement which was the public face of the mob which gathered to storm the Parliament building on 23rd November, 2003. An index of how influential Mr Bokeria is was the glimpse of him smoking a large cigar [!] in the Washington offices of Bruce Jackson, NATO-expander-in-chief and LockheedMartinMarieta alumnus, in the French documentary film *Revolution.com. La conquête de l'est (Revolution.com. The Conquest of the East)*.²⁶

Okruashviliu also accused Saakashvili of ordering an attack on Valeri Gelashvili, a former MP from the opposition Republican Party. Gelashvili was badly beaten by armed men in central Tbilisi in July 2005.

"Saakashvili didn't want to get rid of him [Gelashvili]," Okruashvili said. "He only ordered him to be beaten him up and the task was perfectly executed by [Interior Minister Vano] Merabishvili." Then the businessman, Sandro Girgviani, murdered on 28th January, 2006, beaten at an insiders' restaurant in the capital. Okruashvili pointed the finger again at Interior Minister Merabashvili

Although a short stay in the *Isolator* was enough to bring Mr Okruashvili to his senses and have him recant his charges including then allegation that "Zhvania's corpse was actually brought into the flat where it was apparently discovered," since the relatives of Zhvania and the other dead man point out that neither man's fingerprints were found at the site of their apparent deaths, the mystery of their fate has not been solved for most people by assurances from the authorities that the Prime Minister's death was the sort of leaking gas accident that happens all too often in Tbilisi!²⁷

Zhvania had been a potential rival to Saakashvili for the presidency having enjoyed Shevardnadze's patronage too and acted as his premier before shifting to the new Western-backed reformer, Saakashvili. Unlike both Saakashvili and Okruashvili, Zhvania was not an abrasive man-of-action, but a behind-the-scenes deal-maker. In contrast to the two younger men, Zhvania tried to manoeuvre opponents into concessions rather than browbeat them. His death seemed to signal the likely ascendancy of the hardliners around Saakashvili like Okruashvili. But in the Machiavellian politics of reform in Stalin's homeland, the dialectics of power and profit are the only logic at work. Although Okruashvili seemed to be a likely beneficiary of Zhvania's death, the removal of the Prime Minister who had acted as a moderator on the more extreme and bellicose statements and initiatives of both Saakashvili and Okruashvili actually facilitated the marginalisation of the man from Gori. As Saakashvili eyed re-election, removing his former closest henchman became a logical step – a young man like Okruashvili might get impatient for his turn at the top.

Did Saakashvili want to car-bomb the Rupert Murdoch of the Caucasus?

"Saakashvili told me [Badri] should be got rid of the way it happened to Rafik Hariri."

Irakli Okruashvili

Irakli Okruashvili's claim that President Saakashvili wanted the Georgian oligarch, Badri Patarkatsishvili removed by a car bomb was only one of the sensational allegations made by the ex-defence minister on the television channel, *Imedi*, which is a joint-venture between Mr Patarkatsishvili and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

²⁶ Manon Loizeau's film is sympathetic to the People Power network, but too honest in its portrayal of them and their behaviour for general release and is now only available on Russian voiced-over web-sites. See e.g. <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=45233954>.

²⁷ See <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15869>

Badri Patarkatsishvili has links to both Russia's exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky as well as to Rupert Murdoch. Berezovsky and Murdoch enjoy intimate contacts. Back in September, 2004, "Mudlark" put an intriguing item in his column in the *Financial Times* entitled, "Kremlinology": "Rupert Murdoch and exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky had lunch yesterday at the Savoy Grill. The two men exchanged warm greetings with a bear hug and kisses on each cheek. Murdoch's News Corporation has outdoor poster interests in Russia and watches for other opportunities there but what was message was intended for whom by a meeting so meant to be noticed?"²⁸ With friends and business partners like those it is little wonder that Badri Patarkatsishvili's private jet has unlimited access to British airports at a time when Britain's government insists it has tightened up border controls to keep out ex-Eastern bloc criminals, other dubious types and is checking even legitimate travelers more closely.

The *Imedi* headquarters in Tbilisi decorated with the flags of two superpowers: the United States of America and Murdoch's *News Corporation*.²⁹ The *Imedi* website carries a *Fox News* banner at the top of its homepage.³⁰

Badri Patarkatsishvili met Murdoch in New York on 25th September.³¹ At about the same time as the Badri-Murdoch summit, Okruashvili appeared on their Georgian television channel, *Imedi*, to launch his sensational charges against President Saakashvili. Badri insists that he doesn't have editorial oversight of the *Imedi*'s programming, but then Mr Murdoch has said much the same about the London *Times* or *Fox News*.

As his relations with the Saakashvili regime soured, on 31st October, it was announced by *Imedi* TV that Badri had "granted his shares" to Murdoch's *News Corp*.³² Then Badri flew back from his London base, home to so many distressed oligarchical folk, and announced modestly, "I am not a person with an experience in staging demonstrations, but I decided to come here just to look into your eyes and tell you: I have no ambition of having any official position; the only ambition I have is to be an ordinary citizen of Georgia who will be able to build united and prosperous Georgia. I believe that we have enough wisdom to solve problems through political means."³³

Badri's words echo the classic sentiments offered by People Power advocates denying their ambition for high office. Who said? "The dissident does not operate in the realm of genuine power at all. He is not seeking power. He has no desire for office and does not gather votes. He does not attempt to charm the public; he offers nothing and promises nothing. He can offer, if anything, only his own skin – and he offers it solely because he has no other way of affirming the truth he stands for... The inner most foundation of his 'political' undertaking is moral and existential."³⁴ Those were Vaclav Havel's sentiments as he embarked on his march on Prague

²⁸ See Clay Harris/Mudlark column: "Kremlinology" in *The Financial Times* (16th September, 2004).

²⁹ See Molly Corso, "Georgia: 'We Report, You Decide' – New Media Motto?" in *Transitions online* (29th January, 2007): http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/printf.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=202&NrSection=1&NrArticle=18207&tpid=10&ST1=ad&ST_T1=job&ST_AS1=1&ST2=body&ST_T2=letter&ST_AS2=1&ST3=text&ST_T3=aatol&ST_AS3=1&ST_max=3

³⁰ Go to [imesi.ge/en](http://www.imesi.ge/en).

³¹ See "Georgia will serve as a hub for News Corporation's further expansion" *Civil Georgia* (26th September, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15882>

³² See Badri Patarkatsishvili grants his shares of TV-Radio Broadcasting Company "Imedi" to "News Corp" *Imedi* (31st October, 2007): http://www.imesinews.ge/en/news_read/74738

³³ See *Civil Georgia*, "Patarkatsishvili Addresses Protest Rally" 92nd November, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16169>.

³⁴ Quoted in H. Gordon Skilling, *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (St. Antony's/Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1989), 134. As ever Kundera's irony undercuts post-Communist pretensions as much as Stalinist dogmas: "LIVING IN TRUTH. Such is the formula set forth by Kafka somewhere in the diaries or letters. Franz couldn't quite remember where. But it captivated him. What does it mean to live in truth? Putting it negatively is easy enough: it means not lying, not hiding, and not

Castle and twelve years in office! With Okruashvili's forced exile, maybe Badri is stepping up to the plate as Georgia's next Great White Hope.

Having demanded media freedom for their onslaught against Shevardnadze in 2003, Bokeria's former colleagues in the Liberty Institute drafted a media bill backed by the Georgian government which would have regulated what journalists could say, even what they could wear on screen! That was too much for Mr Murdoch's local representative, F. Lewis Robertson, who called it a "real tragedy", which it must have been to arouse his concern since Mr Robertson never found a problem with home channel Fox's balance: "I am a big Fox News watcher ... I never got that they were leaning to the right,.. [T]hey always had two sides of the story."³⁵ Badri may be less high-minded than Mr Murdoch and the idea of offering both sides of the story is not one which Georgia's journalists have ever taken on board despite 15 years of media education courses and studies at Columbia's journalism center.

One of Okruashvili's allegations on 25th September was that Gigi Bokeria himself was behind the destruction of a half-built Orthodox Church in Adjara in May, 2005. This was portrayed as an attack on the Georgian Church. Although many observers might think that Patriarch Ilia II had discredited himself by his subservience to successive regimes since the Brezhnev era, maybe because Georgia's "reformers" have also gone from Marxism via the Young Pioneers via the Komsomol, Party to the Market Economy they seek his endorsement as what they understand as moral authority. Neither Saakashvili nor Bokeria can have missed the significant mission of charity which took place on 3rd October when the secretary of the Georgian patriarch handed the imprisoned Irakli Okruashvili "fruit, prayer-book, psalms, a cross and candles."³⁶ Ilia II has always been guided, no doubt, by the Holy Spirit, and so has always backed the winning side in Georgian politics in his long tenure in office. Mr. Saakashvili and Gogi Bokeria may rue the day when they demolished one church too many.³⁷

Big Brother is Watching You

"Georgia has made significant progress in outlining and beginning the implementation of judicial reform... But there must be continued progress, especially in ensuring the independence of the judiciary. We also feel that there is a need for greater transparency on the part of the political establishment – in order to better explain and debate reforms with the general public, strengthen their credibility and consolidate the democratic process. This is one more area on which we will keep a *close eye* in the run-up to your Parliamentary and Presidential elections next year..."

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO secretary-general, 4th October, 2007³⁸

At the beginning of 2007, Richard Holbrooke, the would-be next Democratic Secretary of State declared, "the 38-year-old Saakashvili represents almost everything the United States and the

dissimulating. From the time he met Sabina, however, Franz had been living in lies." Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim (Faber & Faber: London, 1985), 112. Was he thinking of Havel's many infidelities towards Olga Havlova?

³⁵ Quoted by Corso, "Georgia 'We Report, You Decide' ..."

³⁶ See "Secretary of Catholicosd-Patriarch Visited Okruashvili in Prison" in *Prime News online* (3rd October, 2007): http://64.233.169.104/search?q=cache:uA_D59sNPMUJ:eng.primenewsonline.com/news/123/ARTICLE/15889/2007-10-3.html+Patriarch+Georgia+fruit+Okruashvili&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1.

³⁷ For the church incident, see Civil Georgia, "Opposition Outcry over Church Demolition" (18th May, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15145>, & <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15869> where Mr Bokeria dismissed Okruashvili as a "frightened fantasist", maybe with good reason.

³⁸ See "Scheffer Lays Out Priorities" in *Civil Georgia* (4th October, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15950>

European Union should support.”³⁹ But as the year progressed ominous signs appeared that the Georgian President was no longer the darling of the West.

Even the new hyper-active President of France who celebrated victory night by denouncing Russia’s “crimes” in Chechnya has distanced himself from his Georgian counterpart’s Russophobe rhetoric. Saakashvili may have over-estimated his standing as a “blood brother” of Nicholas Sarkozy. Despite their shooting-from-the-lip approach, Sarkozy is President of France not of an aid-dependent Caucasian state which does not control much of its territory. The French Defence Minister, Herve Morin, was quoted by Reuters as saying, “Despite all the affection and friendship we have for the Georgians...and I’ve said this to the head of the Georgian government, it can only happen if it is not seen as an additional threat to Russia.”⁴⁰ In short Sarko has told Saaki to cool it.

The surprise visit of NATO secretary-general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, later on 3rd October was an indication of how alarmed Western security circles were by the developments in Georgia. Although Mr Saakashvili tried to show Scheffer’s visit as backing him personally, the NATO bureaucrat pointedly called for more reforms of the judiciary and improvements in the democratic performance of Georgia – and this was the gist of the Voice of America report on his visit.⁴¹ Scheffer told a hastily assembled audience of students at Tbilisi University, “There is a need for greater transparency on the part of the political establishment in order to better explain and debate reforms with the general public, strengthen their credibility and consolidate the democratic process.”⁴² Then at the beginning of November, Washington’s point man for People Power, Assistant Secretary of State, Dan Fried, appeared in Tbilisi and met the opposition leaders.

Mr. Saakashvili won’t need reminding that Shevardnadze’s former soul-mate, James Baker III, who once endorsed his ex-Soviet counterpart for the accolade of the Enron Prize, turned up in Tbilisi five months before the dénouement of the “Rose Revolution” to inform the then Georgian President that Washington was withdrawing the mandate of heaven and transferring it to the youthful Saakashvili.

Mr Saakashvili’s natural reaction to adversity is to lash out. Referring to his critics, Saakashvili told his press conference with NATO chief, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, “My duty is not to calm them down. My duty is to make them even more nervous.”⁴³ This is not model democrat-speak and it embarrasses the Western big cheeses Saakashvili needs to keep on board to provide the financial and military aid which underpins his regime.

Reform in One Family

“Three years ago I detained Saakashvili’s uncle Temur Alasania for taking a bribe of 200 thousand USD, but the president made me release him.”

³⁹ Quoted by Thomas de Waal, “The Georgia Factor” in *The Moscow Times* (12th January, 2007), but the weathervane of Western policy in the Caucasus de Waal cautioned, “The media is less free than it was three years ago, the rule of law is frequently subverted by politicized court cases, minorities still feel uncomfortable. This is not a model government and it does not deserve” Holbrooke’s unqualified praise.

⁴⁰ See “French Minister’s Remarks – Wrong Message to Russia – Burjanadze” in *Civil Georgia* (4th October, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15949>

⁴¹ See “NATO Chief: ‘Door is Open’ for Georgia to join alliance” *VoA* (4th October, 2007): <http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-10-04-voa30.cfm>

⁴² See AP, “NATO chief calls for transparency, judicial independence in Georgia” in *International Herald Tribune* (4th October, 2007): <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/10/04/europe/EU-GEN-Georgia-NATO.php>

⁴³ See “Scheffer’s Visit ‘Highly Successful’ – Saakashvili says” in *Civil Georgia* (4th October, 2007): <http://www.geotimes.ge/index.php?m=home&newsid=7094>.

Irakli Okruashvili (25th September, 2007)⁴⁴

Twenty years ago Romanians joked that under Stalin the Soviet Union had achieved Socialism in One Country, but Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu had gone one better and created Socialism in One Family. Nowadays, Georgia increasingly looks like a one family state. Mikheil Saakashvili's father abandoned the infant and his mother and he became close to her family. His uncle, Temur, is one of those extraordinary networkers whose career flourished across the old Soviet Union giving him contacts among the nomenklatura from Tbilisi to Kiev especially, but out into the wider non-Communist world. The collapse of the Soviet Union found Uncle Temur already well-established across the Atlantic.

Temur Alasania owned property in New York and so it was natural for the young Mikheil to stay in his uncle's property in New York when he studied there and worked for the law firm, Patterson, Bellknap, Webb & Tyler.⁴⁵ His human rights studies at Columbia were helped by lodging at the nearby family apartment. Log cabin to White House may be the American way but Georgians know family connections count for everything.

Even though the number of flights to Tbilisi – excluding oligarchical private jets – has fallen in recent years, the capital was granted a brand new airport complex to add to the one added under Shevardnadze. Every Georgian “knows” that Uncle Temur mediated the project. Unfortunately, hardly had the grandiose new airport been declared open that its roof blew off. The Western donors presumably stumped up again to put it back on.

Other Alasania clan members have seen their stock rise since 2003. Saakashvili is alleged to have helped his half-brother, Giorgi, to his position as an adviser to one of the operators of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline.⁴⁶ Even his mother, Guili, plays a number of roles including manager of grants at the Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, Georgia / George Mason University!⁴⁷

Of course, allegations of the First Family's domination of the Georgian economy are challenged. Suggests that as many as five families actually control the country's economy and have divvied it up between them.⁴⁸

On 25th October, 2007, the Georgian Ombudsman's office distributed the following report by email: “The Public Defender responded to the speech of the President of Georgia on the Government meeting, where Mikheil Saakashvili spoke about meat mafia existing in the country. “Our goal is to destroy any kind of monopoly in Georgia, like we destroyed meat mafia last year in accordance to my order. We won't let anybody to have such privilege and exclusive in Georgian economy in any branch” – stated the President.

However, the Ombudsman's inquiry suggested a different conclusion.

“The case was related to the crime committed in the result of direct instructions of David Kezerashvili, Chief of Financial Police at that time (currently the Minister of Defense of Georgia) towards Austrian meat production company “Schirnhoffer”. It is indicated in the Report, that in spite of resolution of this problem the guilty persons, who created problems to the foreign investor

⁴⁴ See Zaza Jgharkava, “Ladies and Gentlemen, after Much Anticipation Okruashvili Shoots His Load” in *Georgia Today* (29th September, 2007): http://www.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=3601#

⁴⁵ See Chad Nagle, “New World Order Playground. Georgia 2005. US approved “democracy” in the wake of “the Rose Revolution” Global Research.ca (10th October, 2005): <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=NAG20051010&articleId=1063>

⁴⁶ “Mikheil Nikolozovich Saakashvili: The Revolutionary as Man and Myth”

⁴⁷ See <http://www.traccc.cdn.ge/about/structure.html>

⁴⁸ See M. Alkhazashvili, “Fight against corruption once again the marquee bout” translated by Diana Dundua in *The Messenger* (11th October, 2007): http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/1461_october_11_2007/opi_1461.html

and violated Georgian legislation, were not punished. And Georgia has lost the investor, who refused to implement his plans and made investments in our country.”

In other words, according to this report, the current Defence Minister, Kerazashvili, was part of the very group that his patron has promised to “destroy.” This combination rhetorical anti-corruption with politically-targeted arrests corrodes public trust in the Georgian government – at least at home.

Saakashvili’s supporters would point out that Okruashvili’s “party” was a similar nest of cronies from his clan and career networks. Among those arrested at the same time as the fallen anti-corruption angel were close colleagues. For instance, Dimitri Kitoshvili was a partner at the law office “Okruashvili & Company” before entering politics and rising to become President Saakashvili’s spokesman. (The current spat is between two closely-related ‘families’, and like any family quarrel all the more bitter.) Kitoshvili was accused of helping Okruashvili pressure an arrested businessman, Jemal Svanidze, to hand over shares in the mobile phone cash cow, Geocell. Kitovishvili turned state witness to get bail by incriminating Okruashvili as shown in a video on Georgian TV which does not acknowledge the presumption of innocence among other Council of Europe norms which the Shevardnadze regime signed onto when Mikheil Saakashvili was Justice Minister.⁴⁹ Another fallen clan member, Mikheil Kareli is from Tkviavi – the same village as Okruashvili.⁵⁰ On and on the clan lists go but under Western eyes they are ignored.

Although studies of nepotism and clan networks under regimes disapproved of in the West are routinely published giving names and other precise details of the “We know where you live and do business”-variety⁵¹, Saakashvili’s Georgia has been spared until now this Namierite approach to the politics of reform – as Shevardnadze’s was until it lost favour in the West. When will Georgetown or Oxford or the Central European University, let alone *Transparency International* analyse the family trees of the public officials whose salaries George Soros pledged to pay out of his own funds to put corruption in the dustbin of Georgia’s history.

The Ceaușescu of the Caucasus?

“At the maximum I need a two-room apartment, one office, and a few rooms for my staff.”

Mikheil Saakashvili

On 6th January, 2004, the Soros-US taxpayer co-funded website “Transitions online” reported on “Georgia: A President without a palace” relaying to its readers Saakashvili’s assurance, “At the maximum I need a two-room apartment, one office, and a few rooms for my staff.” The editorial argued enthusiastically that the decision by the “master populist” to stick to a two-room flat “could also entrench support for a man who, on 4 January, won a level of support usually seen only in autocratic regimes”! Sadly, for readers relying on Transitions online for information, the magazine never got around to telling them that before long Mr Saakashvili decided that populism is good but palaces are better.

Within weeks Mr Saakashvili took over the former headquarters of the gendarmerie from Nicholas I’s time whose neo-classical portals looked down from a commanding height across Tbilisi. Like a Ceaușescu reborn (and enjoying the same level, of support in Washington and Western Europe as the Balkan bulldozer in his heyday), Saakashvili set about demolishing the fine old building

⁴⁹ 28th Sept Civil Georgia (28th September, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15905>

⁵⁰ See Zaza Jgharkava, “Ladies and Gentlemen, after much anticipation Okruashvili shoots his load” in *Georgia Today* (4th October, 2007): http://www.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=3601#

⁵¹ See e.g. Gulnoza Saidazimova, “NEW TURKMEN PRESIDENT STILL BOUND TO CLANS, NEPOTISM” in *RFE/RL Newsletter* xi/188 Part 1 (11th October, 2007).

and hectares of (often Armenian houses) behind it to create space for --- a Presidential Palace worthy of a “master populist.”

In November, 2006, Members of the European Parliament were still being assured by their official information service, “President Saakashvili lives in a 3-room apartment in a private residential building in Tbilisi with his wife, Sandra, and their two sons.”⁵² By now, Mr Saakashvili was giving regular press conferences including with EU dignitaries on the grand balcony overlooking Old Tbilisi.

When I tried to photograph the new palace in July, 2005, I was detained by Saakashvili’s police. An unidentified man with steel grey hair looking very un-Georgian photographed me from inside an unmarked car, while the Georgian cops told me, “You wouldn’t be allowed to photograph the White House or Buckingham palace would you?” My attempt to explain to them photographing the façade of either the White House or Buckingham Palace were about the only things ordinary people could do in relation to their heads of state’s residences cut no ice. For the first time since Romanian police destroyed my photographs of Ceausescu’s new Palace of the People seventeen years earlier in July, 1988, I saw my amateur photography deleted from the record – in democratic Georgia!⁵³

Although in 2003 Goirgi Arveladze, the president’s spokesman said that only a “facelift” costing “a few thousand laris” was involved. Soon the project took on grotesque proportions.⁵⁴

Arbitrary interference with businesses and other property owners has become the order of the day as the loyal reformers around Saakashvili and the First Family cash in on his tottering hold on power before it may be too late. For instance, the Public Defender has condemned the manner in which the Sony Centre on Rustaveli Avenue in central Tbilisi was raided and shut down with considerable damage to the property. Other businesses like Lavari 2 and the Rustaveli café have suffered similar damage during raids by heavy-handed officials. The Ombudsman’s report refers to the “complete disdain” of the officials responsible for their legal obligations. Significantly, the 200 police officers who took part in the eviction of the Sony Centre on 14th August, 2007 were acting on behalf of the new owner of the building, the Ministry of Economic Development, which ignored the lease arrangements already in operation between the tenants and the former owner.⁵⁵ This kind of high-handed action by Georgian state officers has been replicated across the country since 2004 when private property (for instance, on the valuable coast near Batumi after May, 2004) has been seized without due process. There is a strong suspicion that private profit motivates actions ostensibly carried out for public purposes or supposedly to enforce the law.

Before the Rose Revolution, Mr Saakashvili made frequent attacks on the destruction of Tbilisi’s extraordinarily rich architectural heritage by property speculators close to the Shevardnadze regime. However, since November, 2003, the pace of urban destruction has rapidly increased. George W. Bush’s visit in 2005 involved a Soviet-style reception rally in Freedom Square where

⁵² See “President of Georgia to address the House” (9th November, 2006):

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/briefing_page/12350-313-11-45-20061106BRII2349-09-11-2006-2006/default_p001c003_en.htm.

⁵³ See “Do Not Photograph Saakashvili’s Palace!” *Georgian Times* (Aug. 1, 2005). Shortly afterwards the newspaper was “taken over” and the new editorial line excluded negative news.

⁵⁴ Arveladze quoted in “Saakashvili starts reforms with renovation of his palace” (9th January, 2004):

http://www.georgadze.org/?article_id=167

⁵⁵ See “Sozar Subari Demands To Repair Damage To “Sony Center” And “Lazeri 2” *Prime News* (11th September, 2007): <http://eng.primenewsonline.com/news/123/ARTICLE/15216/2007-09-11.html>. The Ombudsman’s office has distributed an extensive report on these cases, see Concerning Unlawful Eviction of “SONY CENTRE TBILISI” Ltd and “LAZERI-2 TBILISI” (11th September, 2007).

the gaps in the surrounding nineteenth century buildings due to speculative demolitions were masked by posters of the distinguished guest and Georgian soldiers on exercise. Reformers can expropriate and bulldoze
What they like to the greedy applause of Western insiders.

Backing much of the euphemistically-named urban “refurbishment” is the scandal-prone European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the so-called “glistening bank” after its own lavish Ceaușist headquarters in London became the focus of scandal in the 1990s.⁵⁶ The EBRD ignores the racist undertones of much of the reasoning for whose property is emptied of people and “refurbished” and for whose benefit.

Saakashvili’s loyalist, Besik Jugheli, who leads the National Movement in the Georgian Parliament, dismissed those likely to be displaced by redevelopment or disadvantaged by the new property tax as non-Georgians: “Mainly Armenians, Azeris, Kurds and other nationalities live in the historic districts... It is not directed against Georgians!”⁵⁷ Only Armenians...

Nationalism informs so much of the rhetoric of the Saakashvili regime that it may not notice how offensive its racism towards non-Georgians is. But surely the Open Society advocates and civil society NGOs in the West along with the Council of Europe, OSCE and inter-governmental human rights agencies ought to sit up and take notice. Consistency on human rights observation has never been one of the virtues of the OSCE and Council of Europe and their incestuous friends in the NGO community. Georgian regimes have got away with murder while receiving the highest marks from their human rights and democracy assessors, so there is little reason to think that a bit of forced expropriation and ethnically-biased demolition will worry the Council of Europe in Strasbourg or the OSCE in Vienna.

Rather like Ceaușescu towards the *fin-de-regime*, Saakashvili’s nationalist rhetoric has intensified. The Romanian dictator suddenly demanded Russia return Moldova to its rightful owners in 1989, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become ever more frequent subjects of provocative statements and sudden visits by helicopter to the border zones.

Saakashvili has made increasingly bizarre statements. At the end of August, he assured the media that the Mother of God had personally intervened in Georgian affairs more than once! For instance, the Virgin had acted to thwart a grenade attack on the equally devout George W. Bush when he was in Tbilisi 2005, and again She had prevented a stray missile from exploding earlier in August.⁵⁸

In case, nationalism and religion are not sufficient to rally the faithful, Mr Saakashvili has also started doling out good old-fashioned dole to the poor. TV sets have been donated from the presidential hands as well as modest one-off payments to pensioners. On 21st December, 1989, Ceaușescu was cut short making similar promises of better pensions, etc. Will Saakashvili buy off his domestic critics and keep his foreign backers on board?

Saakashvili on the Slippery Slope?

“Mikheil Saakashvili has the charm and energy of youth, the advantage of good English, and a clear commitment to liberal democracy, which he proposes to apply to the whole of his country.

⁵⁶ See Civil Georgia, “EBRD Invests in Georgia’s Property Sector” (16th October, 2007): <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16030>.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Göran Therborn, “Transcaucasian Triptych” in *New Left Review* 46 (July/August, 2007), 86-87.

⁵⁸ See Liz Fuller, “Georgia again increases Defence Spending” in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines* II (30th August, 2007).

His arrival on the scene, his popularity, and his policies offer living proof that things can go right in the southern Caucasus.”

Robert Cottrell of *The Economist* (9th August, 2004)⁵⁹

“Mr Saakashvili is losing the aura he once had of being the sole undisputed leader of Georgia. In the past he has faced down critics with histrionics and theatrical brinkmanship. A sober response, not so far in his political repertoire, may now be called for.”

Anonymous in *The Economist* (4th October, 2007)⁶⁰

With even *The Economist* backing away from its unqualified endorsement of the regime and with a united opposition headed by former Saakashvili insiders calling for a mass protests on 2nd November, Georgia looks set for a turbulent period. None of Georgia’s three presidents since independence in 1991 has left office at the end of a normal term in office. Violent upheaval has been the Georgian way. Whether Mikheil Saakashvili will buck this trend and leave office after a constitutionally-mandate period remains to be seen, but the odds are shortening on another Georgian revolution. Ordinary Georgians have seen no benefit from the coups in 1991 and again in 2003 which were hailed in the West as “People Power” pure and simple. However disillusioned Georgians and other long-suffering people around the world may be with the West’s cult of revolution, so long as bogus revolutions to suit geo-strategic purposes can be passed off as the work of the people, then Georgians will have to suffer another false dawn of freedom and prosperity.

Mikheil Saakashvili will know better than most that dissidents in Georgia are only interviewed by key Western media or quoted by the International Crisis Group when the regime’s fate has been decided in Washington. Shevardnadze’s regime was beyond reproach until the very same media analysts and academics who had praised his anti-corruption record and struggle for democracy suddenly announced that he led a deeply-flawed kleptocratic regime. Observers of “straws in the wind” will recall the sudden appearance of an anti-Shevardnadze article by Georgetown’s Charles King in the *National Interest* in 2001.⁶¹ Early in the current crisis, a similar “Nina Andreevna”-style article by an “apprentice editor” appeared on 28th September recounting sympathetically a visit of anti-Saakashvili politicians to Washington.⁶² When Zviad Gamsakhurdia sought asylum in the West after the pro-Shevardnadze Putsch drove him out of Georgia in January, 1992, Washington and London did not deign to reply. Now his son, Konstantin, is received in the halls of influence by some of the same long-serving political elite who derided his father. Saakashvili knows that such people don’t host luckless outsiders, only potential future insiders.

Looking back to the twilight of Shevardnadze’s regime, Saakashvili will need no reminding that he was then the regime-insider-turned-crusader for honesty and fair elections. Maybe Okruashvili’s spell in the *Isolator* will give him Khodorkovsky-style credentials: he can be sold as a martyr for our common ideals to Westerners whose memories may not be so short that they have forgotten the Rose Revolution of four years ago and who will need a new saviour with an even more fairy-tale “back-story” than either Shevardnadze or Saakashvili. Even the authorities’ bundling of Okruashvili out of the country before the mass demonstrations began on 2nd November suggest that he is still seen as a threat, but maybe Okruashvili’s video-confession will discredit him –

⁵⁹ See Robert Cottrell, “Time to Challenge Russia” in *Transitions online* (9th August, 2004):

<http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=76&NrSection=2&NrArticle=12704&tpid=10>.

⁶⁰ See “Saakashvili’s test: A worm in the bud of the rose revolution” in *The Economist* (4th October, 2007):

http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9905499

⁶¹ See Charles King, “Potemkin Democracy” in *The National Interest* (Summer, 2001). Mr King is a professor at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown.

⁶² See Dougherty <http://www.nationalinterest.org/PrinterFriendly.aspx?id=15642>.

opening the way for a more plausible anti-corruption champion like Salome Zurabishvili. Ms. Zurabishvili would probably enjoy the backing of France's own lead-from-the-mouth president Nicholas Sarkozy, who appears less enamoured of his Georgian counterpart's loquacity at their meetings than Mr Saakashvili may think. Sarkozy likes to do the talking.

Ms. Zurabishvili who was France's ambassador to Georgia before becoming Georgia's foreign minister originally endorsed Saakashvili in *The Washington Post* in 2004 saying that Saakashvili was "the last chance for Georgia."⁶³ But in mid-October, Ms Zurabishvili told the Azeri press agency, "I have never been Saakashvili's ally. Salome Zurabishvili always supported democratic development of Georgia. I have always tried development of Georgia as a democratic, independent and free state. I have never been a supporter of Saakashvili and his party."⁶⁴ Already using the presidential third person when speaking of herself, Ms. Zurabishvili may have grounds for seeing herself as the Benazir Bhutto of the Caucasus.

To survive in office, Saakashvili may have to jettison what is left of his commitment to Council of Europe judicial standards – after all, they never got in the way of Shevardnadze's security forces throughout the 1990s. It was only when the powers-that-be in the West decided to move Eduard Shevardnadze along that the Council of Europe began to reproach his regime for its use of torture or appalling prison conditions. There will be little comfort for Saakashvili that the Council of Europe's Secretary-General, Terry Davis, was the rapporteur who approved Georgia's application to join that august body while Shevardnadze still basked in Western approval. Davis was one of the first to turn on Shevardnadze and endorse Saakashvili, in turn being promoted to top Euro-human rights bureaucrat. Since his predecessor, Walter Schwemmer lost the Secretary-Generalship of the CoE for criticising Saakashvili's way of governing after the Rose Revolution we may doubt if Mr Davis will make such a vulgar error if Georgia's turbulent politics throw up a new hero of the people.

The choice between the likes of Saakashvili and Okruashvili is not a choice of principles. Both are rhetorically anti-Russian, pro-NATO, pro-market and so on, and, like their predecessors in the Georgian in-fighting of the early 1990s, both lead clans with tentacles into the dark corners of Georgian society – a murky reality which their Western admirers prefer to ignore today as they did when glamorising Shevardnadze, Ioseliani and Kitovani after 1991.

Only one thing is certain: the international clique which awarded Shevardnadze so many ovations after the 1991 coup before booing him off the world stage four years ago, and which then went on to sing Saakashvili's praises from the same hymn-sheet, will be on hand to hail his successor provided only that his promises of prosperity and honesty prove as hollow as his predecessors' declarations of principle. Until Western governments, media and human rights groups acknowledge their record of enthusiastic support for failed regimes in Georgia in the past and show contrition and shame for their role there, there is no hope of international support for real reforms, worthy of the name, in Georgia or elsewhere. Even if Saakashvili falls, ordinary Georgians will still suffer the dead-weight of the West's unapologetic backing of corrupt and feuding regimes. The downward spiral in the Caucasus is far from over.

⁶³ See Peter Baker, <http://www.georgiaemb.org/DisplayMedia.asp?id=341>

⁶⁴ See APA, "Azerbaijan's Taking Lead in South Caucasus may cause Biggest States to lose Interest in Georgia" (17th October, 2007); <http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=37245>. Given the poverty and oppression visited on Georgia during the period of Great Power interest many might welcome that development.