

A Georgian chalk circle: open letter to the west

By Tedo Japaridze

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The president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, is as busy as ever. In the past week alone he has accused Russia of supporting efforts to overthrow his government, and met with opposition politicians to discuss a way beyond the domestic political impasse in the country. The fact that he made the allegation against Moscow on the eve of planned military exercises by Nato in the country, led some to question whether this was a ploy by the Georgian leader (and his many western advisers and lobbyists) to distract attention from the continuing round of anti-government demonstrations. In any event, having survived the apparent coup attempt the president hosted the first round of negotiations with representatives of the opposition. These seem to have gone nowhere. [Georgia's](#) [1] permanent political crisis continues.

An endemic crisis without resolution calls for exceptional action. Everyone does what they can in such circumstances. In this case, as someone with a certain amount of experience of Georgia's internal and external politics since the early 1990s, I decided to write an open letter. The nature of such a letter is precisely that anyone can read it, but its intended recipients are also those friends and colleagues in the United States and Europe with whom I worked so hard for those tumultuous years since Georgia regained its independence in the early 1990s to make my country a functioning and relevant state.

I intentionally focus on Georgia's internal problems and will not touch our external problems and specifically the relations with our biggest northern neighbour. Why? Because I strongly believe that the sooner Georgia resolves its internal political crisis and emerges from the stalemate, the easier it will be to tackle external challenges and risks.

No one, neither in the opposition nor (naturally) the government asked me to write this letter. I have a certain amount of differences with both entities, and moreover I do not know many details and the nuances of the ongoing situation on the ground. But I know enough to feel sure that something of the nature of this appeal is needed.

The revolution's roads

To understand where we Georgia is now, we need to look back a little and consider how reached this seemingly impossible impasse. The inheritance of the "rose revolution" of 2003-04 which brought a new political leadership to power is an appropriate place to start.

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Mikheil Saakashvili, the new president [3] who took office on 25 January 2004, inherited a weak and disorganised country. But in trying to overcome that and affected by the revolutionary euphoria that surrounded his rise [4] to power, he and many others failed to pay attention to the country's positive and negative achievements alike. Some of the positive ones were won at great price, in the early independence years that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In part as a result of this inattention, the president and many around him embarked on what has become a traditional Georgian pastime since the 1990s: reinventing the wheel.

There was progress - much of which was achieved in collaboration with and support from Georgia's western friends. Alongside the independence regained in 1990, many actions and programmes - macroeconomic and financial stabilisation, the drafting of a new constitution, the introduction of a new currency, the withdrawal of Russian border-guards and of military bases located on Georgian territory, and the construction of critical infrastructure like the pipelines across Georgia - were vital. I'm certain that had those energy projects (one of the few strategic interests the west has in this part of the world) not been implemented, the August 2008 war could have had even more tragic consequences than it did.

These positive achievements were reached despite a civil war, conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, corruption, and increasing state weakness. But there is something else here as well. What has been crumbling in Georgia over these turbulent years have been the survivals of the past, the institutions and mindsets of the Soviet era; and what has been growing has been something entirely new, waiting (as the poet said) to be born.

President Saakashvili made a major contribution to the new by using television to promote his anti-corruption effort, by reviving the country's tax system and armed forces, and by taking steps that allowed President George W Bush to call Georgia "a regional beacon of democracy". This statement had less to do with any final victory, as Saakashvili and some around him interpreted it, than as an indication of how far Georgia had come and how much it still needed to go on the path of reform to become a capable state.

In part because of that misinterpretation, the liberal extremism of the "rose revolution" became illiberal, a kind of radical Trotskyism with consequences that have proved far worse than anyone had expected.

The vicious circles

Despite his democratic credentials, President Saakashvili's approach to rebuilding the state increasingly came to resemble the model recognised as authoritarian elsewhere in the former Soviet space, specifically in Russia. After the first post-revolutionary parliamentary elections in which his supporters gained a substantial majority of seats, the president implemented a constitutional change which shifted considerable power from the legislature to the executive; he also seriously diminished the independence and role of the country's supreme court. The result was to create a kind of "super-presidency".

Over time, this new regime also curtailed media freedom and restricted the activities of civil society - which are essential elements of any democracy (in many respects too they made the "rose revolution" possible). As a result, human and political

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Robert Parsons, "Georgia's

rights (specifically private-property rights) suffered; and there were even increases in the number of politically motivated assaults and killings, many of which remain unsolved.

In November 2007, the government's police forcibly and violently suppressed mass demonstrations by the opposition. The snap [5] presidential (January 2008 [6]) and parliamentary (May 2008 [7]) elections that were then held increased Saakashvili's personal power further at the expense of other parts of the government and society (rather than rebalancing it, as some European Union and OSCE representatives expected). This trend meant that a country that had been a beacon of democracy in 2003-04 had slid into a twilight-zone of trivial authoritarianism and ill-governance.

The situation deteriorated throughout 2008, and after the exhaustion and destruction of the August war people started again to take to the streets to protest - particularly around and since the potent anniversary of 9 April 2009, twenty years since the massacre by Soviet special troops in Tbilisi. A greater share of Georgians now view President Saakashvili's resignation as the only way out of the crisis.

These recent events are not an entirely Georgian concern. On the one hand, what happens in Georgia will inevitably cast a shadow on developments across the south Caucasus, as well as damaging the reputation of those in the west and specifically in the United States who have invested so much in "Project Georgia". On the other, the joint experiences of the period since 1990 has shown that Georgians need the active involvement of friends like the US if we all - I emphasise "all", Georgia's opponents and even enemies as well as its friends and allies - are going to escape from the vicious circles in which we find ourselves now entrapped.

It would be wonderful if we Georgians could resolve the current impasse between President Saakashvili and the Georgian opposition on our own. But I fear that without your help, we will not be able to resolve it; and that instead the crisis will deepen, with consequences for us, for the region and ultimately for you that will be far worse. Moreover, I am convinced that the west can help us broker a deal between the two sides in Tbilisi so that we will not have to reinvent the wheel yet again.

The grave problems

In writing this, I know very well that Georgia is not the highest priority in United States and European politics right now. But the situation can change fast when a country in a key location is as delicately balanced, and dangerously divided, as mine is today. Consequently, it is very important not to give in to the temptation of assuming that if the Tbilisi demonstrations quieten down, things will work out and the west can look away.

We all need to remember that in situations like this, the critical thing is not the number of demonstrators but the problems, frustrations [8] and disenchantments that cause respectful and dignified citizens of Georgia to come to the streets.

After all, when the "revolutionaries" stormed parliament in November 2003, there were no more than 20,000-25,000 demonstrators in the streets of Tbilisi. This is a reminder that we can sometimes concentrate too much on the mechanics of democracy (the outcome of elections which are every so often a bit too "mystic" in our part of the world, or the percentage of support of this or that leader) and too little with the democratic process itself. It is the latter, in which an election and its result may be only the beginning of a never-ending progression of perfection and transformation, which is the essence of democracy.

In this light, the current frustration and displeasure with the Georgian system and its style of governance - which, as its ultimate outcome, led to the events of August 2008 - gets close to the heart of Georgia's democratic crisis today. I strongly believe that the internal imbalances and flaws of governance I have identified contributed to the severity of Georgia's defeat and dismemberment. In fact, I would claim with a touch of resentment that all of the hard work we undertook since the 1990s to make certain that the west understood Georgia's strategic importance in its own right was washed away by these events. Georgia is once more defined in our strategic galaxy as a small part [8] of the "Russia problem": exactly where we tried to prevent it from landing. That too should be understood by the international community.

The dire situation that has provoked people to protest in Tbilisi is not being addressed because there are no mechanisms or rules of the game that can be the foundation for a collective effort to find answers.

Among the grave problems that need to be addressed are: constitutional and electoral issues, the rule of law, good governance, the economy, institutional cohesion, political and social imbalances, judicial independence, the resolution of sensitive private-property issues, law and order in general, freedom of the mass media (and specifically of broadcasting outlets), reform of the election commission and electoral code, separation of the law-enforcement structures and the local governors (so called "administrative resources"), and immediate abolition of the so-called "masked street gangs" that have emerged in the streets of Tbilisi to hunt down and beat up dozens of protesters. The list of problems is long and varied - and this is just the beginning.

The missed chances

It makes me relieved that the European Union and other international institutions are actively involved in the resolution of the current Georgian stalemate and urging both sides (including the leaders of the opposition) to show more realism and flexibility. But still I would like to pose a question, albeit rhetorical, to my friends in the EU and elsewhere: were you not aware of the existence of these aforementioned problems in the body-politic [9] of Georgia before the mass demonstrations exploded; or did you learn about their existence only after the rallies and the political crisis itself reached their current dimensions? What else then has to happen in Georgia for you to pay appropriate attention?

When after the visit of President Bush to Tbilisi, and when some negative trends in the methods of governance there had become more or less visible, I asked the same question of one of my most experienced friend in Washington. He answered without hesitation: "If something crumbles down in Georgia, Tede? We are so busy with so many more-than-urgent problems and issues in the world - Georgia and developments down there are not the main items on our radar screen".

For his part, Georgia's president taking no real steps to mend the laundry-list of problems. True, there is a lot of talk about "dialogue" - too much, much more than any actions, and the notion of "dialogue" itself has been compromised because of that. This is no way to lay the groundwork for a good-faith discourse. The present approach could in fact result in deeper polarisation with the opposition, and consequent greater anger and mistrust directed against Mikheil Saakashvili.

It is clear that the current Georgian government, if left to its own devices, will not bring stability, peace or democracy to Georgia. I am confident that without those demonstrations, it would have continued to govern in the same "revolutionary", quasi-Trotskyist fashion. It has shown itself to be unwilling to listen to other voices, to govern more inclusively, or even to entertain the thought that those outside its own circles (including in the opposition) might have something valuable to

contribute to Georgia - perhaps even more than they themselves currently offer to the Georgian people. This attitude will inevitably, in my view, lead to further instability, conflict and chaos.

The false friends

What we Georgians need, and where you - my American and European friends - can help us, is to reach a consensus about the rules of the game so that we can move beyond the current blockage and focus on the legion of substantive issues.

It does not help in this respect if people abroad say to themselves and to Georgians that Georgia is "democratic enough"; or Mikheil Saakashvili is "not authoritative enough" to resolve them. In fact, we Georgians are neither fully democratic *nor* authoritarian - we do not have at this moment the capacity to be either. Instead, my country is a "quasi-democratic" or "quasi-authoritarian" state (or, as I would prefer to say, a "manipulative democracy").

All too often, the "democratic bureaucrats" in Tbilisi have learned how to talk so much "like" democrats that our western friends do not recognise - or prefer not to recognise - how undemocratic they truly are. That's why there are many more "newborn" democrats around these days than there is democracy itself, and why these days Georgia resembles a kind of *demokratūra* where decisions are made personally by the president and his coterie of closest associates.

An American friend observed to me recently: "Georgian democracy lies at the intersection of Jonathan Swift's and George Orwell's fiction - the current Georgian minister for the penitentiary and probation system is responsible for dialogue about 'democratic renewal' with the opposition, and the security minister was declared by President Saakashvili to be the 'backbone of Georgian society'. As is usual when Swift and Orwell are taken together, the tears trump the laughter."

What should be done? We need to expand the circle and involve not just Georgians but you, our friends, as well. You need to press both sides to come together. President Saakashvili must be told that he has to make meaningful changes, including the promulgation of a new electoral code and a new electoral commission, to change the system and style of governance, and crowning that transformation by holding truly democratic and fair elections (or conduct a referendum, as identified by the constitution, in the case of a continued political stalemate); the opposition must be told that it must work within the system, but only if the currently warped system itself is recalibrated fundamentally.

It's obvious that neither side will only accept these strictures if they are accompanied by a western guarantee of trust. If the two sides can continue to talk and agree on something feasible, then the west should still monitor the implementation of any accord. Western involvement is any event essential - not least as there is a Georgian political tendency to agree and instantly disagree.

If the United States and Europe do get involved, they will need to carefully select an appropriate messenger. It should be someone who knows Georgia but who is not connected so closely either with earlier administrations or with President Saakashvili; otherwise the message he or she delivers will be ignored. Fortunately, both Washington and European capitals have many people who are both knowledgeable about Georgia and committed more to the development of democracy there than to the survival of a particular leader. I personally witnessed the arrival of those high-level delegations to Georgia on the eve of the "rose revolution".

The clear choice

Time is of the essence. Without outside pressure of this kind, I fear that the current standoff between President Saakashvili and the opposition will gradually spin out of control, either toward anarchic chaos or authoritarianism. I urge the United States and Europe to take this appeal seriously, and I propose that in the first instance they send a group of wise observers to Tbilisi to explore what could be done.

The credibility of Georgia's efforts to become a "normal country" - including the accession in some foreseeable future to Nato and/or the European Union - depends significantly on the country making progress in democratisation and capacity-building on a parallel track. Any stalling or regression on these fronts will hold the country back and even reverse what progress has been made in the post-independence years.

With wise decisions and western help of the kind described here, as well as a modicum of luck - something that is always needed in life - then I believe we can look forward to a stable democratic Georgia that will be able to occupy a proud place in international life. Without these ingredients, and in particular if people in the west assume that they can let the situation in Georgia ride along in the absence of clear and active decisions, the situation will certainly get worse - and thus work against your own freedom as well as ours.

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