

COMMENTARY

Why Georgia's Election Matters

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Since Georgia's 2003 'Rose Revolution', in which Mikhail Saakashvili, the country's young pro-Western president took power from the Soviet Union's former foreign minister, Tbilisi has been playing catch-up with its Eastern European counterparts. But, according to many observers, Georgia's lofty dreams of NATO and European Union membership came crashing down in early November, when Tbilisi witnessed a disproportionate crackdown on anti-government protesters. The disconcerting sight of tear gas and truncheons in the region's 'beacon of democracy' caused Georgia's Western cheerleaders to think twice before offering the country a NATO Membership Action Plan at the alliance's upcoming April summit in Bucharest.

The protests included those left behind by rapid and sweeping reforms aimed at Euroatlantic transformation. For example, Saakashvili sacked Georgia's notorious bribe-seeking road police almost over night, replacing them with a Western-standard force noted to be more professional than that of many new EU member states. Unsurprisingly, a number of former policemen were in the crowds that shouted for early elections and Saakashvili's resignation in front of the parliament building. But, many beneficiaries of reform simply fed up with the administration's absolutist policies participated as well. A self-absorbed administration, too wrapped up in its quest to impress the West reacted clumsily and arrogantly, but Saakashvili acquiesced to one of the protestors' demands, moving up presidential elections from next autumn to 5 January.

Now, in the aftermath of a highly positive process of contentious electioneering, Saakashvili has emerged the victor, with about 53% of the vote. Significant for Georgia's democratic development, the elections were not only deemed generally free and fair by Western observers, but a robust, united opposition emerged in the process. However, this opposition, led by a former Tbilisi council-member and a former French diplomat who plan to turn the country into a parliamentary republic, is busy organizing another round of long-term protests in central Tbilisi. Western observers can only hope that Saakashvili has learned his lesson.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that regardless of how post-election events play out, no real constituency exists in Georgia that would turn the country away from its Westward course. In a national referendum overshadowed by the presidential election, 77% of respondents favored a Georgia within NATO. Despite this, some European policymakers are relieved that the pressure is off to hand Georgia NATO accession guarantees, as they were reluctant to do so even before the events of November. However, the reality is that the country's strategic significance for the West will compel membership in the future.

While Russia's antipathy towards its leadership, and Georgia's festering frozen conflicts make the country a difficult case for the Euroatlantic community, its geopolitical importance regarding European energy security, stability in Europe's new Black Sea neighborhood, and transnational terrorism, arms, drug and human trafficking outweighs those concerns. Georgia is the needle's eye through which Caspian and Central Asian energy must flow to ameliorate Europe's overdependence on Russian supplies. It behooves the West to support

Tbilisi's soft power efforts at preventing Georgia's poor and isolated Russian-sponsored state-lets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from becoming mini-Afghanistans right on Europe's borders.

Washington remains an unstinting Georgia-booster, not least because of the small South Caucasus country's enthusiastic deployment with NATO forces in Afghanistan and largest per capita contribution in Iraq. And, attendant NATO-standard military reforms in Georgia have been essential to keeping order back home.

Washington and its European counterparts should do more to engage with Tbilisi on the highest political level. This means recognizing Georgia's accomplishments, as the fastest reforming country in the world (according to the World Bank), and ambitions, to be stable, prosperous, and democratic. It means providing technical, logistical, and financial support to achieve these goals, not to prop up Saakashvili's administration, but to encourage the Western-oriented aspirations of the vast majority of Georgia's population. The fear in Europe that too much involvement will encourage Tbilisi to ask for EU membership is not only misplaced, but undermines strategic discussions on issues of great significance for both: security and energy. While EU accession is not on the table at this point, the EU's open door policy must be kept alive and active.

Current European enthusiasm for closing enlargement at Bulgaria and Romania is not only short-sighted, but will scuttle the delicate political, economic and security balance around the Black Sea; not to mention undermine the EU-Caspian energy link. Responsible decision-makers on both sides of the Atlantic must resist this trend, while supporting democratic development and Western integration in Georgia and the wider European neighborhood.

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