
Georgia's 'friendly' democracy.

By Vadim Dubnov
RIA Novosti

16/3/2007

Representatives of all leading political forces in Georgia have signed a memo on the country's early accession to NATO, and this has caused a sensation.

President Mikhail Saakashvili and the opposition have never displayed such unanimity on any other issue.

A year ago Angela Merkel said that it was possible to consider Georgia's accession to NATO on easier terms, and Tbilisi took her words very seriously. But Georgia has not scored much success on its road to NATO. The Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which Tbilisi viewed almost as its entry ticket to the alliance, has fallen through. Last September, the IPAP implementation interim assessment team arrived in Tbilisi, and was very scant of comment. Instead of launching the long-awaited Membership Action Plan (MAP), it had to introduce a new non-binding euphemism, Intensive Dialogue.

Apart from military parameters, NATO standards include some parameters that seem far removed from the security doctrine, such as the election system and the independence of courts of law. The Georgian authorities are optimistic on this score - a political course oriented towards the West is almost a guarantee of democracy because Western partners will not forgive any deviations from it. Meanwhile, practice shows that there is some room for maneuver, and that Tbilisi authorities have already learnt to work in this manner.

Having destroyed the traditional clan system of power, Saakashvili has actually built a model that could be described as "a friendly democracy." Top positions go to close friends rather than relatives, co-workers or people from the same neighborhood. This model is somewhat less stable, although by and large Saakashvili has managed to reproduce in Georgia a familiar system with a de facto one-party parliament, where the opposition is pointless and state decisions are made by one man. Initially, his off-scale popularity allowed him to keep in check all natural post-revolutionary temptations.

Loud scandals with the more odious pre-revolutionary leaders have not grown into a large-scale redistribution of property, for which credit goes to the president. He appoints liberal leaders to direct the economic development. When the influential Prime Minister Zurab Zhvaniya was alive (he died a mysterious death in February 2005), they managed to offset the security-related forces, for which the president also has a soft place in his heart.

Georgia's macro-economic indicators are impressive indeed. In 2003 its budget was barely \$300 million, whereas in 2007 it has topped two billion dollars. The national bank's stabilization fund has accumulated more than \$1.5 billion in treasury accounts.

But these figures are as dubious as they are relative. The economic miracle is a result of good administration by 90%. It consists of taxes, which have started to be collected, and the customs that the government has placed under its control. The tax reform is considered quite liberal although it does not exactly encourage business transparency. It is possible to receive a bank credit with 16% interest, but without start-up capital or serious guarantees no bank

will issue a credit. As a result, those who made it under Shevardnadze, who was president from 1995 to 2003, are still afloat or in power for the most part. This also explains the construction boom. It is one of the few areas of investment with quick return and legal reliability.

But in an effort to assert his power, Saakashvili finds it increasingly difficult to deal with controversies between different branches of authority. The liberal economists in power remain independent, whereas the security-related forces are more and more tempted to use their influence. Since there are no many big fortunes in Georgia, the turn of its only real oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili should have come pretty soon. His scandalous escape to Britain is also a good illustration of the current situation in Georgia.

Patarkatsishvili gave up on politics a long time ago. While critical of the authorities, and even keeping afloat the Georgian opposition, he did not position himself as an overt enemy of Tbilisi. He is not likely to have been pressured by the president - their relations were more in the nature of stable cold peace. His current problems are rooted in the economic confrontation between different groups of the ruling elite. Not only security-related forces, but also people from the closest presidential entourage are involved in the Patarkatsishvili case, and for this reason the imbalance in the Georgian system of power is obviously progressing.

These events are taking place against the background of a certain cool-off in Georgia's contacts with Europe that was somewhat irritated by Saakashvili's readiness to exacerbate relations with Moscow. On the one hand, he was pressing Europe to side with Georgia in its conflict with Russia - something that Europe had no intention of doing. On the other hand, Europe is mortified by the prospect of the expansion of the Kosovo agenda, and has been concerned about the permanent risk of tough confrontation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

It seems that Saakashvili is also trying to adjust his course. The year 2006 has been almost officially recognized as a failure on the foreign policy front, particularly in Europe. The impressive demonstration of national unity in the drive for NATO's entry has come in very handy - apart from this unity, Tbilisi has also shown its readiness to be civilized towards the opposition. The world has not yet responded to this, but the Georgian opposition is clearly flattered. Even those opposition members who have long given up their hopes to be heard in any place but Tbilisi's central square have been leaving the president's office in a good mood.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.
