
Mikheil Saakashvili : Where Are My Western Friends?

By Anna Nemtsova

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In the largest opposition demonstration in Georgia since November 2007' WHEN President Mikheil Saakashvili tested his democratic credentials by sending in riot police to quash the protests'tens of thousands of people filled Tbilisi's leafy Rustaveli Avenue last Thursday to demand Saakashvili's resignation.

The president retreated to his residence, where he spoke with NEWSWEEK's Anna Nemtsova about the crowds on the street, his difficult relationship with Russia and how the West has largely abandoned him in recent months. Excerpts:

Nemtsova: Who wants your resignation?

Saakashvili: Mostly unemployed people. We fired about 250,000 people as a result of our reforms. A big percentage of these people have not managed to find themselves in the new economy. Fighting corruption and crime, we put thousands of people in jail. In Tbilisi alone we convicted 8,000 people; all of their relatives are outside today, asking me to resign.

What is the most painful part of the criticism?

I am not hurt by the criticism in Georgia, as I am hearing it from two opposition TV channels all day long. I did not expect the West to put all the relationships with us on hold while waiting for this revolution. An official delegation from France decided to postpone their visit. A Turkish company moved a scheduled contract signing until after April 9, and an Arab company until April 12. What is the matter with these people? Do we stop going to Paris or Strasbourg during their street protests?

Who sponsors the Georgian opposition?

Most of the money'millions of dollars'comes from Russian oligarchs. I have documentary proof of that, which I am not making public yet. Whether the money is being sent from Russia under the supervision of the Russian government, that I do not know.

Some experts predict a new military conflict as a result of social instability in Georgia. How possible is it that Russia and Georgia will begin another war?

The Russian government would probably be happy to see me leave the post. I could suppose that some of the military authorities in Russia think of attacking Georgia today, to say later that it was me who invaded Russia to distract the attention of my opposition. A week ago Russian tanks arrived in South Ossetia. We have information that there are about 5,000 Russian troops in the territory of South Ossetia, and 5,000 troops in Abkhazia.

Do you think President Medvedev would support the idea of another war with Georgia?

I do not think he would appreciate such an idea, as I saw how happy he was when President Obama gave him half of a smile. Russia heard clearly Obama's characterization of the August war. He called it "invasion," and by that one word Obama drew a red line between Russia and Georgia. Neither Putin nor Medvedev is interested in crossing it again today.

Do you think it is possible that the Russian and American presidents might make a deal over Georgia? How do you think U.S. politics will affect Georgia under the new president?

The Kremlin might make an attempt to agree with Obama's say, that Russia helps the U.S. in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia, and the U.S. helps Russia to achieve their geopolitical interests in this territory, to help Russia change leadership in this country. For many, I seem to be a dead end for relations with Russia. I used to be much more charmed by U.S. politics.

Who are your supporters in the U.S. today?

I have quite a few good contacts. Of course, my best friend was always John McCain. You can say he is Georgian already. We expect McCain to come and visit us in a week or so. I have good relationships with Hillary Clinton, Joseph Biden and especially Richard Holbrooke'he is my teacher. I learned a lot of great things from him.

Do you feel that the West is disappointed with you? Have you been in touch with President Obama yet?

Oh, yes, I have talked to him on the phone. The problem is not about us'the problem is about their own internal politics. We have integrated into U.S. internal politics. So during the change of power, there was some sort of vacuum in America. Nobody knew what to do with us. Everybody, including France, was waiting for Obama's guideline on what to do about Georgia. I admire American ideas. I used to idealize America under Bush, when ideas were above pragmatic politics. Now it is a new time, when pragmatic politics are in charge of ideas. That might spoil the America I know.

Would your policy with Russia be different now if you could turn time back?

Moscow blamed us for not keeping our promises. I am not sure what could be done now. I could hardly do anything differently. The values we appreciate are not embraced by Russia. Should I have compromised? If I did, we would have been like Kyrgyzstan, losing our democratic values now, or as poor as Armenia, whose economy fully depends on Russia. Just as our politics have been independent from the Kremlin all these years, we will handle the demonstrations as if the Russian issue did not exist, and Russia as if the demonstrations did not exist.

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