
Saakashvili vs Opposition

By Yana AMELINA

en.fondsk.ru - Eurasia - 13/3/2009

Georgian opposition hopes to oust the country's President M. Saakashvili who has no intention to step down until his term in office expires in 2013. Saakashvili's major opponents are, for the most part, a bunch of hyperactive and absolutely disunited individuals lacking strategic vision, and, importantly, at least so far they have no financial backing from the West. At the same time Moscow has no reasons to support any of the Georgian opposition figures as neither of them can be regarded as pro-Russian or even be credited with an adequate perception of the recent and current developments.

The circumstance common to the careers of all the key Georgian opposition leaders - former head of the parliament N. Burjanadze, former Georgian ambassador to the UN I. Alasania, former Georgian Prime Minister Z. Nogaideli - is that somehow all of them became aware of the ruinous character of Saakashvili's political course literally overnight. Besides, neither of them has proposed a strategy - or even some sort of tactic - that could help to remove the current Georgian President from power. Saakashvili's aggression against South Ossetia last August, which ended with Georgia's crushing defeat and put the country on the verge of a national catastrophe, became a wakeup call for the three opposition leaders. Only at this point did they realize that the five years of Saakashvili's presidency led the country nowhere. Before that neither of the three politicians had any problem with Saakashvili, or at least they did not feel that any urgent action was needed.

As for the action, the opposition appears totally helpless from the organizational point of view. Twelve political parties including Burjanadze's Democratic Movement - United Georgia, Georgia's Path led by former Foreign Minister S. Zurabishvili, the Freedom headed by K. Gamsakhurdia (the son of Georgia's first post-Soviet President), and a number of smaller players plus 4 NGOs announced that mass protest rallies would be held on April 9, the only demand being the unconditional resignation of President Saakashvili.

Alasania (The Alliance for Georgia) and Nogaideli (For Fair Georgia) have not joined the plan so far and promised to make the decision regarding the issue on the eve of the event based on the public opinion dynamic. While the former Georgian Prime Minister Nogaideli simply attempted to be cautious, Alasania issued an ultimatum to Saakashvili giving him 10 days to hold a referendum on early elections. When the demand was ignored, the opposition launched a 'public plebiscite' in the form of collecting signatures in support of Saakashvili's resignation. Its activists claim - quite dubiously - to have obtained about 45,000 signatures in just several days. Though, no matter how many signatures Georgians are going to throw in, legally the process cannot entail any consequences.

The April 9 rallies will probably be equally useless. The Georgian President has used force against his own nation in the past more than once (in South Ossetia in 2004 and 2008 and - also quite massively - on November 7, 2007 when an opposition rally was dispersed). There is no reason to expect that this time Saakashvili is going to respect the public opinion and resign voluntarily, especially since Georgia has already seen early elections in January, 2008. Police Minister V. Merabishvili, one of Saakashvili's top five 'inner circle' aides, already warned that the administration would not allow an armed conflict to erupt and would promptly terminate any attempts to instigate one. Merabishvili's words

should be taken seriously as more than his political career is at stake` he is likely to face criminal charges in the case of Saakashvili's ouster.

The opposition's inability to unite is due not only to the colliding ambitions of its leaders but also to the fact that Washington has not yet offered financial support to Saakashvili's potential successors. Nevertheless, the insane Saakashvili is no longer Washington's favorite. His activities have undermined the US political and economic interests in the region. He started the war in South Ossetia ignoring not only the warnings sounded by more reasonable people from his own administration (V. Merabishvili and G. Bezhuashvili, for example) but even direct instructions issued by the US. One of the results of the summer debacle was a surge of anti-Americanism in Georgia. It appears that the current US Administration would be happier to see N. Burjanadze or I. Alasania as the President of Georgia and while the Washington is shopping for a new favorite the diversity of tactic approaches adopted by various opposition leaders is meant to give the US a wider choice.

Burjanadze's position is persistently anti-Russian and this is a well-known fact. Nogaideli is a financial expert and clearly not a top-league politician. Alasania is an obscure figure, and not only because he has spent the last 2.5 years in the US as Georgia's envoy to the UN ` obviously, the secrecy surrounding him is intentional. He gave practically no interviews throughout his career, at times refusing to talk to Russian media under the ridiculous pretext of `lack of fluency in Russian'. He did become somewhat more open after being dismissed from his post last December. Alasania's recent declarations leave no doubt that he is the protÃ©gÃ© of the US Department of State, and nobody in the Georgian political circles attempts to make it a secret. Not surprisingly his Alliance for Georgia was joined by the markedly pro-Western and anti-Russian Republican Party and the slightly more moderate New Right.0D

As an ambassador to the UN, Alasania used to say that Georgia's political priorities should be the non-recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by other countries, the integration with Europe, and the rights of Georgian refugees to return to Abkhazia. Whereas the first of the three issues can to an extent be addressed by Tbilisi, the remaining two are absolutely unsolvable under the current circumstances. `We must become an integral element of the European security architecture' said Alasania on November 13, 2008 in an interview to the Georgian 24 Hours. ` `At the same time it should be demonstrated to our allies that Georgia is evolving as a truly democratic country'. The above is meaningless verbiage as democracy in the case of Georgia is clearly nonexistent and the European security does not belong to the discourse altogether.

Unfortunately Alasania's calls for `restoring the relations with Russia' are meaningless verbiage too. `Russia had organized the provocation in South Ossetia but President Saakashvili failed to prevent Georgia from getting involved. The withdrawal of the Russian forces from the region must be ensured by means of international pressure and by the implementation of an exceptionally pragmatic political course', said Alasania at a media conference in January. Comments are unnecessary: the anti-Russian rhetoric in the cases of Alasania and Burjanadze is not fundamentally different.

This is the view about the August, 2008 war in Abkhazia held by `the young and promising' Georgian politician (Alasania is just 35): `Russia ignored the existing world order and violated all norms of the international law. The war was an aggression against the independent Georgia'. He did say in a December interview to a news outlet: `Though the events of last August have complicated the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity, I am convinced that in case the society unites, new elections are held, and a

democratic transformation takes place, peaceful coexistence with the Ossetian and Abkhazian people in the framework of Georgia will once again become possible'. He told the media on March 6 that 'first of all, trust between Abkhazians and Georgians and Ossetians and Georgians must be rebuilt'. He said the process should be realized through economic, humanitarian, and cultural projects that can boost dialog in the society divided by the war.

His language was just as vague in 2003 when he discussed the outlook for defusing the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia: 'Georgia is proposing a new policy - the policy of dialog with the Abkhazian side, the key objective being an all-encompassing settlement on the basis of respect for legitimate interests of both the Abkhazian and the Georgian populations'. Again, this is verbiage and nothing else. Currently, talking about rebuilding trust between Georgia on the one side and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other is as absurd as it was to anticipate a recovery in the relations between Georgia and Abkhazia in the not-so-distant future six years ago. Alasania is an intelligent individual and is fully aware of the real contours of the situation - simply at the moment he has nothing serious to say.

Tbilisi - Moscow
