
Georgians trust in God, in Saakashvili not so much

By Adrian Blomfield
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The Georgian people are fabled for their generosity and charm - sometimes to ridiculous extremes. As a heavy Russian artillery assault pounded one village near the Ossetian border, an old Georgian woman crept alongside a garden wall where I was taking shelter to offer me apples from her orchard.

Yet many Georgians have a tendency towards recklessness - as anyone who has driven on their roads can confirm.

The international consensus is that Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's president, took the national trait of recklessness to a farcical level when he decided to launch an offensive to liberate the region of South Ossetia from separatist rebel control.

advertisementAround the world and even in Georgia itself, where the mood has swiftly changed from gung-ho optimism to glumness and introspection, many wonder how the president could have made such a monumental blunder.

Did he not, they say in bewilderment, realise the consequences of antagonising Russia at a time when the Kremlin was itching to show off its rediscovered bad-boy swagger?

As Georgians begin to analyse what went wrong, Saakashvili's future appears bleak.

The consequences of his adventure are little short of catastrophic. The president has been humiliated, his demoralised army is in disarray. Even more seriously, Georgia's dream of joining Nato and securing international protection against Russia is far further from realisation than it was a week ago.

Yet Saakashvili's gamble - while it has undoubtedly backfired - was not quite as foolhardy as might appear. The president, after all, is not a stupid man, even if he can come across as naïve, even foolish on occasion. He speaks five languages fluently and has even learnt Abkhaz and Ossetian, the languages of the two breakaway areas.

For a long time he showed restraint, despite his own instincts and the advice of his administration's hawks, in dealing with his two renegade regions in the face of intense provocation from Russia.

Moscow not only funded and probably armed the rebels in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia; it also persuaded many of the people there to take up Russian passports by luring them with the promise of pensions. This gave the Kremlin the disingenuous pretext of defending Russian "citizens" to justify military intervention in Georgia.

Provocation, in the shape of sporadic air raids, intensified from Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in February. From that point, a war with Georgia over either South Ossetia or Abkhazia became likely.

The stakes were raised in April, when Nato promised Georgia that it would eventually be placed on the path to membership - a move that Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister, could not tolerate.

By goading Saakashvili into war, Russia knew that Georgia's Nato ambitions would be scuppered. European members had opposed an American push to fast-track Georgia's membership precisely because of the unresolved issues of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Yet Saakashvili knew that, if he did not resolve the separatist problem, European members would continue to block Georgia's membership bid. With Russian interference, a diplomatic solution to the crisis would never be reached. That left Saakashvili with the option of a swift surgical strike to take back the provinces.

Believing that South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity's relations with the Kremlin had deteriorated to the extent that the Russians would not retaliate, he decided to end the Ossetia problem first.

Given that his troops had received US training, and that much of his army had been blooded in Iraq, he believed he could take South Ossetia within 48 hours.

It was a grave miscalculation. Saakashvili both overestimated the prowess of his army and underestimated the likely Russian response.

Passionate, colourful and instinctive, Saakashvili is often blinded by his visions for Georgia to such an extent that he becomes detached from reality.

Determined to remove the Soviet-era hangovers who dominated Georgia's bureaucracy, the president thought that the best way to move the country towards liberal democracy was to replace them with educated youngsters. He surrounded himself with bright, earnest advisers—20 in their twenties and thirties who had gone to college in America and had eagerly devoured the writings of Western economists and political scientists.

Masters of public relations, and brimming with enthusiasm, this cadre of clever and often beautiful young things essentially became Mr Saakashvili's kitchen cabinet. But of experience in the intricacies of diplomacy and the treacheries of regional politics, they had little.

In going to war with Russia, the Georgian president took his counsel not from seasoned heads, but from what was essentially a university debating team. That mistake could cost Saakashvili his job.
