
International Recognition Butresses Internal Legitimacy

By Vladimir Socor
Eurasia Daily Monitor - 16/1/2008

On January 14 U.S. President George W. Bush telephoned his congratulations to the reelected president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili. Summarizing Bush's position and the two presidents' conversation, U.S. National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley told the press aboard Air Force One that Saakashvili had 'clearly won more than 50%' of the votes [officially 53.5%]; that international as well as Georgian authorities have validated the outcome; and that Saakashvili will 'obviously come to Washington as the new president of Georgia' (White House readout, Reuters, January 14).

Bush had waited for Georgia's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) to announce the final returns (see EDM, January 14) and called Saakashvili from Dubai during Bush's visit to the Middle East. On the same day, U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack congratulated Saakashvili and the voters of Georgia on the holding of this election, citing international observers' overall positive assessment along with remaining challenges (State Department release, January 14).

In Tbilisi, U.S. ambassador John Tefft confirmed that a U.S. delegation would attend Saakashvili's second-term inauguration. Tefft also reaffirmed the international observers' conclusion that no major violations had occurred that would have changed the election's outcome. He told opposition leaders that he had visited the CEC four times and watched the processing of protocols and vote-counting.

The head of the European Commission's Delegation to Georgia and Armenia (the Tbilisi-based permanent mission of the European Union), Per Eklund, also confirmed that the EU would attend the inauguration, but seemed to strike a noncommittal position on the election itself: The opposition has grievances, the government should look into them, and the EU will listen but not judge, he said according to local media. This stance seems in tune with the top Brussels authorities' own aloof stance thus far. The EU has remained largely silent at the public level during these events in Georgia (see EDM, January 9).

Immediately upon the Georgian CEC's final announcement, leaders of the three Baltic states as well as Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko announced their intention to attend Saakashvili's second-term inauguration (BNS, UNIAN, January 14). Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko had visited with Saakashvili during the election campaign in Georgia.

Western governments and international organizations expect the reelected Saakashvili to defuse tensions through dialogue with the opposition, ahead of the April parliamentary elections. Saakashvili and Parliament Chair Nino Burjanadze (acting head of state during the presidential election campaign) have already begun reaching out to the opposition. The minimal goal is political stability and the holding of parliamentary elections in April that would meet democratic standards. Actual political consensus with at least some opposition parties seems out of reach at this stage, given those parties' irreconcilable attitude toward the presidential election.

Saakashvili met with the runner-up presidential contender, Levan Gachechiladze (26% of the votes cast), on January 7 to discuss a modus vivendi. However, Gachechiladze turned down the overture, in accord with the leaders of nine groups that backed his candidacy. On January 8,

Gachechiladze led a group of opposition party leaders bursting into the CEC headquarters and physically threatening to remove CEC president Levan Tarkhnishvili, in full view of the mass media, which the opposition leaders had invited for this spectacle (see EDM, January 9). Thus far, opposition leaders insist that they would only negotiate with the government about a runoff presidential election.

On January 9 and 11, Saakashvili announced that government posts could be offered to best-qualified candidates from outside the National Movement majority party. He indicated that such appointments would not be offered on a party or political basis, but rather on an individual basis to competent specialists. With this, Saakashvili is adhering to a campaign promise to broaden the government's recruitment pool.

Seeking viable political interlocutors within the opposition could be a follow-up step. However, this goal might prove out of reach in the tense aftermath of the presidential election and an equally polarized run-up to the April parliamentary elections. For now at least, opposition leaders refuse any such discussions or indeed to recognize Saakashvili's election as valid.

Burjanadze has persistently encouraged opposition leaders to enter into a dialogue with the governing majority in parliament and with the reelected president. Thus she plays an integrating (as distinct from mediating) role in a polarized and volatile atmosphere. Burjanadze is reminding opposition leaders that political decisions are not to be made in the streets and not by the number of demonstrators, but by dialogue among parties within the framework of state institutions (Civil Georgia, January 14). That Georgian opposition groups need such reminding reflects their deficit of political maturity and -- in the Georgia-specific context -- their deficit of emotional maturity as well.

(Rustavi-2 TV, Civil Georgia, Messenger, January 9-14)
