
Ian Bremmer : Political conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi will complicate Russia-US relations

RIA Novosti - 10/1/2008

Mikhail Saakashvili's winning of the presidential election in Georgia will lead to more strained relations between Moscow and Tbilisi that in its turn will complicate the Russian-US dialogue, according to Ian Bremmer, the leading American expert on CIS affairs, the President of influential Eurasia Group consulting firm. He commented the election results and shared his views on the future developments within the Moscow-Washington-Tbilisi triangle in an interview to RIA Novosti New York Bureau Chief Dmitry Gornostaev.

- Mr. Bremmer, to what extent was Saakashvili's outright winning predictable?

- It was no surprise that Saakashvili was the lead vote-getter, and developments immediately before the election indicated he might well top 50% and win in the first round. He ran an effective campaign focused on key voter concerns, especially poverty and unemployment. He mobilized state resources for the effort, amending the 2008 budget to increase social spending to limit anti-government sentiment.

The lack of reliable polling and a large pool of undecided voters made it difficult to predict with high confidence that Saakashvili would win more than 50% and avoid a second round run-off until the campaign's closing days. But events in the campaign's closing days, including the political scandal that discredited Badri Patarkatsishvili and limits on the opposition's ability to run a coherent campaign, made it probable that Saakashvili would win the 50%+1 he wanted.

- What do you think about the opposition's claims that the elections were stolen? Is their call to the people to protest the official results at the street rally legitimate and reasonable?

The opposition still insists that the vote was rigged, demanding a second round run-off between Saakashvili and his principal opponent Levan Gachechiladze. The OSCE report acknowledged both the significant challenges that the opposition candidates faced in the pre-election environment and noted a significant number of election-day violations. But, whatever the suspicions of the opposition, the OSCE report found the election to be "consistent with most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections."

The opposition will continue to complain about misuse of government resources and coercion of the public service, government, and military personnel. But the OSCE report maintains that the violations that occurred on election day (missing ballots, slow counting and inconsistencies with voters being inked) were not significant enough to change the result of the election.

- Could the rally turn into unrest or will the outcome end the political crisis in Georgia?

Several factors limit the risk of civil unrest or a major political crisis in Georgia. The results have the recognition of the international community, and parliamentary elections are now set for the spring.

Despite the opposition's pledge to continue with protests and to challenge the results in court, the OSCE report and strong backing for the government

from the international community suggest the protests are unlikely to escalate.

Parliamentary elections will help turn the opposition's attention toward a new battleground.

- Is there a difference in the official position of the United States to the street protests during the Rose Revolution and to anti-Saakashvili rallies that happened in November and that take place today in Tbilisi?

In November 2003, there was an overwhelming sense - both within Georgia and internationally that the election was obviously rigged. Independent exit polls all pointed to a different result and indicated that Saakashvili had in fact won. The official position of the US following this latest election is that Saakashvili has won a 'fair' and 'convincing' victory and that the opposition protests are unlikely to change this official position. And despite some concern in Washington that Saakashvili has sometimes generated unnecessary tensions with Russia, he is still considered a US ally.

- Will this election change the balance of the external influence on the situation in Georgia, bearing in mind a contradiction of interests of Russia and the United States in the Caucasus region?

Georgia's and Washington's relations with Russia remain tense. Mostly recently, tensions spiked following the opposition protests in Georgia, which Saakashvili's government blamed on the Kremlin. There is no movement toward resolving several major disputes, including lifting the Russian embargo on key Georgian imports or resolving the WTO dispute. With Saakashvili remaining in power, there is likely to be more of these tensions.

Russia's denunciation of Georgia's election results suggests that Saakashvili's pledges to restore Georgia's territorial integrity pose even greater risks to regional stability. With tension in the separatist regions mounting, the lack of tangible progress on these conflicts makes promises of territorial reintegration sound like threats. Still, Tbilisi is unlikely to abandon its moderate approach, and neither Georgia nor Russia is likely to actively stoke more conflict.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric from Tbilisi is likely to continue ahead of the spring parliamentary elections. In addition, a potential unilateral declaration of independence from Kosovo could lead separatists in breakaway regions of Georgia to declare their own independence, a move Moscow might well support. As a result, tensions are higher than normal in the already volatile separatist regions.

Political conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi further complicate already strained relations between Russia and the US. Turmoil in the breakaway territories could make things much worse. The bush administration is anxious to avoid more conflict with Russia at a moment when it is distracted by foreign policy challenges in Iraq and Iran.
