

Georgia: the next episode

Dennis Sammut

Georgia's roller-coaster politics over the last two decades has often felt like a never-ending soap opera – whose cast is a small elite who have sometimes swapped roles and titles, but which has hardly ever changed. Each seemingly weekly episode – each with its own plot and sub-plots – was quickly forgotten once the next episode unfolded. In the excitement of the wars, civil wars, revolutions and permanent political drama, one was often tempted to focus more on the personalities and the detail rather than on the issues and the bigger picture.

There is, however, some reason to believe that beyond this somewhat cynical view, something else was going on – something which may finally take Georgia out of the quagmire into which history, geography and the folly of its politicians seemed to have landed it towards a future as a full and equal member of the European family. The seven months that have passed since the parliamentary elections on 1 October 2012 are not in themselves the cause of this optimism. Instead, it is a change in the political mind-set of the Georgians, and especially young people, which makes this new factor convincing enough for a reappraisal of the Georgian reality. Not only did it result in an orderly change of government against all odds, but it has also since kept the country's politicians on the straight and narrow as they navigate an unprecedented transfer of power and an uneasy period of political co-habitation.

Once Bidzina Ivanishvili launched his election campaign in spring 2012, it became clear that the political game in Georgia had changed. Many in Georgia and outside attributed this to Ivanishvili's financial clout coming into play. But there were other factors that were even more significant. The political team of President Mikheil Saakashvili/the United National Movement (UNM) was neither gentle nor soft in its response to Ivanishvili, neither before, nor during, nor after the elections, but it acted largely within bounds. Their biggest tactical mistake was to over-estimate the importance of Ivanishvili's money and under-estimate the changing mood in Georgian society. In government, the Georgian Dream administration has also been largely prudent and seems to have understood this new reality.

Many attribute the new-found maturity of Georgian politicians to international pressure, and indeed this was helpful. But by far the most important determining factor was a resolve among Georgians to turn the politics of their country around. The role that Georgian civil society played in this crucial period was exemplary and Georgian young people showed courage and vision, which kept the politicians in check and in the end forced politicians to play by the rules.

Georgia now has a multi-party parliament with an identifiable government and opposition. However, the current landscape of political parties is unlikely to last, and the scene is set for a different line-up in the future.

The ruling Georgian Dream coalition is a very broad church of different groups who agree on their opposition to Saakashvili but have different outlooks and ethos. Ivanishvili's charisma, money and under-estimated political astuteness forged the Georgian Dream Coalition and may be able to keep it together for some time to come, but the three main forces within it – Ivanishvili's own Georgian Dream Party, the Republican Party headed by Parliamentary Chairman David Usupashvili, and Defence Minister Irakli Alasania's Free Democrats – are unlikely to be together for the next election.

The UNM, for its part, even in its reduced circumstances, is also a coalition of personalities and interests that at this point have nothing much to keep them together except the sheer instinct of political survival. One can see two or three groups emerging from it once President Saakashvili's term as president ends in October. Many valid people within the UNM have a role to play in Georgia's future, but it is unlikely they will be able to do that together.

There are also signs that other parties will emerge with a stronger following than we have seen so far, most likely to the left and to the right of the political spectrum, or to represent special interest groups. In a recent by-election in a working-class Tbilisi constituency, Kakha Kukava's Free Georgia made a strong showing, finishing in second place.

For some, this political fragmentation is a nightmare scenario, but it need not be. A lot will depend on the development and resilience of the institutions of state, such as parliament, the civil service and the judiciary.

Ever since the October elections Georgians have been familiar with the phrase “political co-habitation”. It suited some to confuse it with “checks and balances”, which it is not, but fortunately most Georgians understand the difference. Georgians are increasingly demanding real checks and balances: an independent judiciary, parliamentary scrutiny of the executive, an independent media, and respect and space for civil society and grassroots movements operating outside the sphere of the politicians. The best news to have come out of Georgia in recent months is that Ivanishvili’s government has understood this, and is taking measures to satisfy these demands. The process still faces major obstacles – a culture of lack of transparency in government, heavy-handed police tactics (evident recently in the break-up of a Mayday March by a group of young activists, Laboratory 1918), intolerance of anybody who is ‘different’, and paranoia about the ‘unity’ of the state continue to cloud the process. The difference is that at this point, these obstacles look surmountable.

Three broad policy decisions taken in recent months have stabilised the broader political context, allowing society to focus more on consolidating the domestic political situation:

- The resolution unanimously adopted by the Georgian Parliament on 8 March 2013 re-affirming the country’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This, together with the enthusiasm with which Ivanishvili’s government is pursuing Georgia’s dual quest of NATO membership and closer relations with the EU, has deflated speculation about possible changes in foreign policy orientation by the new government.
- The government’s strategy of adopting a long-term and flexible approach to the issue of Georgia’s separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia whilst maintaining a principled position on territorial integrity. The UNM continues to make some rumbles on this, but by and large it is acquiescing to this strategy too.
- A ‘real-politik’ attitude towards Russia which recognises that history and geography demand that Georgia ‘manages’ Russia rather than confronts it. The tensions between the two countries have been much defused over the last few months, even if neither side has made any concessions to the other. Georgia stands to benefit economically from this development and this approach is widely popular among the Georgian public, even though Saakashvili insists on calling it a sell-out.

Like any other country, Georgia has other problems: not least that of developing its economy in the face of a global economic downturn. In the end this will probably make or break the Ivanishvili government. There is some disappointment that Ivanishvili’s economic policies have so far not been imaginative enough, but with some of the bigger issues now out of the way, Ivanishvili is likely to be able to concentrate much more on this in the future. Sectors like tourism, agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises, light industry and services are crying out for good leadership.

The European Union has been a good friend of Georgia over the years, providing financial assistance, political support and mentoring. It failed after 2003 to hold the government of President Saakashvili to proper scrutiny for its record on democracy and human rights, and in this it failed both the Georgian people and Saakashvili himself. This mistake should not be repeated now.

Georgia is on track to sign an Association Agreement with the EU at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit in November. This will open new possibilities for co-operation in the economic sphere, and financial support and mentoring should increase after that. The EU now needs to play a bigger political role in Georgia. It needs to counterbalance Russia, demand high standards in the democratic and human rights sphere from the Georgian government, and provide continuous political support for Georgia’s civil society (which remains the vanguard of the Georgian democratic process).

Whilst there is no doubt that there will be other episodes of the Georgian story to come in the next few months and years, there is also now a basis for Georgia to enter a period of consolidation and development that will help turn its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations into a reality.

Dennis Sammut is a foreign policy analyst with two decades of experience of working in the Caucasus region and other parts of the Former Soviet Union and the wider Middle East. He is the Director of LINKS Analysis, Managing Editor of the news portal www.commonspace.eu and a member of the Board of the John Smith Memorial Trust. He has previously served with the United Nations in Afghanistan and as a member of the EU’s Tagliavini Commission on the war in Georgia. He is currently a member of St. Peter’s College at Oxford University.