

DECISION-MAKING AND GEORGIA'S PERPETUAL REVOLUTION: THE CASE OF IDP HOUSING

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Abstract

Observers tend to enthuse about Georgia's leadership or damn it, but such black-and-white views do little to explain what is really going on in the country. Examining the government's recent efforts to provide housing to those internally displaced by the August 2008 conflict with Russia sheds light not only on the housing program itself, but on contemporary Georgian politics in general. In particular, four traits characteristic of the ruling United National Movement's revolutionary governance are brought into focus: informal decision-making, fluid roles, heroic action, and vanguard politics.

Keywords: *Georgian IDPs, decision-making, heroic action, democracy*

Introduction: Georgia's Rulers: Saints or Sinners?

Beginning in late 2008, strange new structures suddenly started mushrooming out of the plains west of Tbilisi, Georgia's capital. Day and night, in sunshine and under floodlights, construction workers labored around the clock to build row after row of identical-looking small houses at breakneck speed. Within a few months, over a dozen new settlements had appeared in the landscape, new homes for people displaced by the Georgian-Russian fighting over the disputed separatist territory of South Ossetia just months earlier. Of the over 100,000 Georgians who fled their homes during the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008, most were able to return before the onset of winter. Over half of the remaining long-term displaced, around 18,000 people, have now been moved into 15 "mushroom villages".¹

The reactions of international observers in Tbilisi to this government undertaking varied hugely. Cynics interpreted the move as a public relations stunt. According to this view, Mikheil Saakashvili, a telegenic megalomaniac with sinister backers, seized power in a 2003 coup, duped Western media into thinking he was a democratic reformer (in early 2005, US senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain even nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize

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¹ For detailed figures on the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their distribution, see the documents compiled on the Georgia Relief Action website, <http://relief.migration.ge/intranet/>

together with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko²), and proceeded to make trains run on time while redistributing the fruits of privatizations and the assets of political enemies to his supporters. Brushing aside the warnings of his backers in Washington, Saakashvili started a disastrous war, lost it, and then wangled 4.5 billion dollars in aid out of embarrassed donor nations unwilling to let Georgia collapse and fall back into Moscow's orbit.

According to these cynics, building new houses for those displaced by the war fulfills several functions for the government: improving its image at home and abroad, ridding public buildings in the capital of the embarrassing human fallout of its misadventure, presenting visible results to alienated donors and a public critical of the military defeat, bailing out well-connected construction companies facing economic meltdown,³ and generating ample opportunities for graft in the top echelons of power.

To illustrate their point, the critics point to Tserovani, the new settlement closest to the capital. The government steers foreign dignitaries and Georgian television crews alike towards this Potemkin village, with its solidly built houses and indoor plumbing, while the residents in other mushroom villages just down the road are left to contemplate peeling paint and wooden outhouses.

Sympathizers of the current government see a completely different picture. In their view, Saakashvili's initiative shows just how much Georgia has changed for the better since the "Rose Revolution"⁴ of 2003. Shevardnadze's government had cynically kept many of those internally displaced by Georgia's 1990s wars in misery to bolster its claims to the lost territories and preserve international aid flows, while at the same time engaging in profitable illicit trade with the self-declared republics and embezzling the aid money destined for the displaced.⁵ In contrast to its predecessor, the new government cared about the nation and the people under its stewardship. In the name of humanitarianism, Saakashvili's government boldly abandoned the long-standing pretense that Georgia's displaced would be going home soon,⁶ stared realities in the face, and did its utmost to help the victims of war. Not only was the government well-intentioned, it also proved itself highly capable. While there may have been some quality problems with the new homes, such lapses were unavoidable when building within tight timeframes and budgets. With around fifty construction companies

² *Associated Press*, "U.S. senators nominate Saakashvili, Yushchenko for Nobel prize," January 26, 2005, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-104744926.html> (accessed March 20, 2009). For an interesting perspective on this, see Ryan Powers, "Did Scheunemann Engineer McCain's 2005 Nobel Prize Nomination of Georgian President for Financial Gain?," 2008, <http://thinkprogress.org/2008/08/13/georgia-mccain-nobel/> (accessed March 20, 2009).

³ United Nations and World Bank, "Georgia Joint Needs Assessment" (Tbilisi: World Bank, 2008), completed on October 9, 2008, the full uncensored version remains secret at the request of the Georgian government.

⁴ For more background on the "Rose Revolution", see David Anable, "The Role of Georgia's Media – and Western Aid – in the Rose Revolution" (working paper, Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, Boston, 2005). Also of interest: Zurab Karumidze and James Wertsch (eds), *'Enough!' The Rose Revolution in the Republic of Georgia 2003* (New York: Nova, 2005); and Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

⁵ For a particularly compelling analysis of Shevardnadze's rule, see Barbara Christophe "Understanding Politics in Georgia," *Demstar Research Report no. 22*, (2004), www.demstar.dk (accessed October 7, 2008).

⁶ To track the changes in Georgian government policy towards the displaced, see Benjamin Sweeney, "Annotated Bibliography on IDPs in Georgia" (Tbilisi: TI Georgia, March 2009), http://www.transparency.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=215&info_id=478 (accessed March 28, 2009).

reportedly involved,⁷ some skimming may have taken place, but the results on the ground are broadly in line with the stated cost per house.

Revolutionary Governance

Black-and-white views such as those above do not do justice to the situation in Georgia, where decision-making is opaque, agendas are frequently mixed, and cabinet meetings involve the good, the bad and the ugly convening around the same table under the leadership of a mercurial president whose intelligence is as undisputable as his impulsiveness, arrogance and lack of self-control.⁸ The mushroom villages are neither the latest scam of a coherent conspiracy bent on fooling its patrons in the West while pursuing totalitarian control at home, nor are they the product of a perfect democracy led by humanistic saints. Reality is far more interesting than that.

The Georgian government sees itself as a revolutionary government, with the vanguard National Movement party engaged in a heroic and idealistic mission to build a strong Georgian state which will lead the nation into a bright future as a respected member of the European family. Within a few years, the party line runs, the National Movement transformed Georgia from a failed state that was the laughing stock of the international media⁹ into a functional state whose citizens enjoy electricity, good roads, state pensions, and freedom from depredation by criminals in and out of uniform.

From the moment it took power, Saakashvili's team showed scant respect for legal niceties. Inheriting a hollow state with incoherent legislation, a corrupt civil service and an untrustworthy judiciary, the new leaders decided that radical reform could only be achieved if they leapfrogged procedural hurdles and sidestepped legalistic arguments in their pursuit of the greater good. With overwhelming public support – and under the averted eyes of sympathetic Western observers – Saakashvili's team started off by throwing members of the corrupt old guard into prison¹⁰ on live TV, making them “donate” millions of their stolen dollars to the treasury, and using the proceeds to raise pensions for the elderly, many of whom had spent years going hungry due to the avarice of those who were now being squeezed. The frequently Western-educated reformers in Tbilisi also moved to curtail local and regional government autonomy, arguing that corruption could only be eliminated by sidelining incompetent and ‘backward’¹¹ structures outside the enlightened capital.

⁷ In February 2009, Transparency International Georgia filed Freedom of Information Act requests with the Ministry of Interior and the MRA in order to obtain the names of the companies involved. In spite of a legal obligation to officially respond within ten days, neither ministry has provided this information to date. TI Georgia is monitoring aid to Georgia, including housing for IDPs, on an ongoing basis. See www.transparency.ge for its recent publications on the issue.

⁸ For example, see the following recent profile: Wendell Steavenson, “Marching Through Georgia,” *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2008, pp. 64ff, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/12/15/081215fa_fact_steavenson (accessed March 16, 2009).

⁹ For example, see Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

¹⁰ Lili di Puppò. “Anti-corruption reforms in Georgia: a few successes and big challenges ahead,” *Caucas.com*, October, 2005, http://www.caucas.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=191 (accessed March 20, 2009).

¹¹ Gerald Mars and Yochanan Altman, “The Cultural Bases of Georgia’s Second Economy,” *Soviet Studies*, vol. 35:4 (1983): 546-560. More generally, see Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

Crucially, the National Movement achieved its most dramatic successes by prioritizing results and the perceived greater good over political and individual freedoms, civil liberties and the rule of law. Today, the domestic legitimacy of the ruling group rests not on its dubious record on democracy and civil rights, but on its forceful actions to restore Georgia's national dignity, the near elimination of petty corruption, and provision of tangible benefits and visible improvements in infrastructure. Over five years after the National Movement seized power, the revolutionary mindset endures. When the ruling team's legitimacy and power seemed acutely under threat in September 2008, President Saakashvili responded by promising Georgians not gradual evolution, but a "Second Rose Revolution".¹²

Examining the mushroom villages through the lens of Georgia's revolutionary politics sheds light not only on the housing program itself, but on contemporary Georgian politics in general. In particular, four traits characteristic of National Movement governance are brought into focus: informal decision-making, fluid roles, heroic action, and vanguard politics.

Informal Decision-Making

To this day, it remains mysterious who took the momentous decision to reverse long-established policy and take concrete steps towards providing "durable" (read: permanent) housing not only to those displaced by the August 2008 war, but also to the over 100,000 Georgians displaced in the 1990s who still lack permanent residences. It is equally unclear who decided to address the housing needs of the displaced by building mushroom villages across eastern and central Georgia before the winter. In Georgia, key decisions are taken informally and often spontaneously by a closely knit group of maybe half a dozen revolutionary comrades with long-standing personal ties.¹³ Decision-making on the mushroom villages seems to have followed this pattern, with rumors indicating that the powerful Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is headed by insider Vano Merabishvili, suddenly began construction of the villages without even informing the nominally responsible Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA), which at that time was formally headed by an outsider without clout in the inner sanctum of power.

The more important a decision, the less likely it is to leave a paper trail, and the easier it is to amend or reverse. For example, it appears that the government – though "the government" in itself may be a misleading term in this context – originally planned to construct all houses to the same design. The question of who finally decided to build houses with differing designs will probably never be satisfactorily answered.¹⁴

¹² Civil Georgia, "Saakashvili speaks of 'Second Rose Revolution'," Civil Georgia, September 24, 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19587> (accessed March 20, 2009).

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Georgia: The Risks of Winter", International Crisis Group, November 26, 2008, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5787&l=1> (accessed March 11, 2009).

¹⁴ Rumor has it that the original plan foresaw indoor plumbing for all houses, but was shot down by Kakha Bendukidze, a shadowy oligarch who at the time formally held the post of head of government administration, but informally focused on economic policy-making. (Note that neither his formal nor his informal role appeared to have any connection with housing issues.) Bendukidze is alleged to have argued that the displaced were all villagers and therefore used to outdoor latrines anyway. As usual in Georgia, it is not verifiable whether this rumor is based on facts.

Fluid Roles

The seemingly bizarre decision to place supervision of the construction process under the remit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs mirrored developments inside the MRA that seemed equally puzzling to outsiders. In late October 2008, amidst an acute and still very fluid humanitarian crisis, the head of the MRA fell victim to a cabinet reshuffle.¹⁵ The outgoing minister, Tamar Martiashvili, had been viewed as an ineffectual political lightweight. Her replacement, Koba Subeliani, while not a member of the tight inner circle himself, had ranked second on the National Movement's party list during the last elections and brandished a reputation as a man who could be relied on to get a job done. In fact, the reshuffle had absolutely no effect on the ground, as Subeliani had *de facto* been in charge of the displacement crisis since the war;¹⁶ the elevation of the parliamentarian to the post of minister simply formalized his long-standing role. Meanwhile, registration of the newly displaced, theoretically under the remit of the MRA, was being carried out by the Civil Registration Agency, part of the Ministry of Justice. Pre-war, the MRA had been a low profile ministry with few highly competent staff, while the more prominent Ministry of Justice had better human resources with which to meet the challenge.

Ministry of Internal Affairs construction, epiphenomenal reshuffles and registration outsourcing all illustrate a central feature of National Movement governance: with low human capacity nationwide and a lack of trust in outsiders' abilities and probity, formal roles and structures count for little in the quest for meeting high priority goals.

The combination of informal decision-making and fluid roles makes it nearly impossible to get exact data on any kind of government activity in Georgia. For example, the MRA appears to be genuinely unable to answer the simple question as to how many houses were built in total. (The fragmentary data that are available may or may not conflate new houses in the mushroom villages with newly renovated apartments in public buildings.) An aid organization spent weeks trying to get a list of the around 6,000 people thought to live in Tserovani before it was given some handwritten pieces of paper, and MRA figures of displaced people do not necessarily match those compiled by the Civil Registration Agency.

Heroic Action

Heroic action¹⁷ is the third trait characteristic of National Movement governance, and may shed some light on why Georgia's rulers decided to rush ahead and build accommodation for nearly 20,000 people in a matter of months, against the advice of most international experts who argued for temporary winter shelters followed by construction in the spring. While there

¹⁵ Civil Georgia, "Four Ministers Lose Post in New Cabinet," Civil Georgia, October 29, 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19857> (accessed March 20, 2009).

¹⁶ Civil Georgia, "88,000 Georgians displaced – UNHCR," Civil Georgia, August 16, 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19164> (accessed March 20, 2009).

¹⁷ The concept of heroic action as used here implies a primacy of ends over means in the pursuit of grandiose schemes. It is adopted from Ken Jowitt, who persuasively argues that Soviet-era grand projects like the space programme were partly driven by a communist party whose identity and legitimacy depended on keeping the heroic image of the revolutionary period alive. See Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

were sound arguments in favor of rapid and radical action, such as the need to move displaced people out of kindergartens and schools in order to let lessons continue, those in power may have decided to attempt the impossible¹⁸ simply because of the National Movement's deep and long-standing love affair with dramatic heroic action.

The period immediately following the "Rose Revolution", the golden age for the ruling team, was also its most heroic age. Promising radical change, Saakashvili won the January 2004 presidential elections with a resounding 96 percent of the vote. Armed with a popular mandate to do whatever needed to be done to get Georgia back on track again, the National Movement protagonists wildly jumped from issue to burning issue in perpetual crisis mode with no regard to established structures or legal constraints, adulated by Georgians and cheered along by the West as they fired the entire traffic police overnight one day and took out bandits in Svaneti in a televised shootout the next.

Contrary to the predictions of many observers, who had expected the government to settle into a pattern of humdrum bureaucratic administration once the initial momentum of the revolution had worn off, the pattern of heroic radical action in pursuit of grandiose goals survived the immediate aftermath of the revolution for several reasons. First, based on past experience, heroic action was seen as the key to success. The National Movement sees an inherent contradiction between having a well-developed plan and achieving radical change. Second, the dismantling of old institutions without creating new ones to take their place perpetuated the pattern of heroic action by generating a need for subsequent quick fixes. Third, the mercurial personality of the chief executive militated against his becoming a staid administrator-in-chief in a grey suit.¹⁹ Fourth, Georgians are widely thought to perform best at work if the task is presented as a monumental challenge requiring urgent and full-out action. Fifth, things in Georgia either happen quickly or they do not happen at all. By the time a detailed plan has been developed, the momentum has already passed and all attention and energy has shifted onto the next heroic quest. Sixth, Georgian culture worships the strong man of action as much as it despises the drab bureaucrat enslaved by rules, and prefers the grandiose to the mundane.²⁰ Elections in Georgia are not won by administrators with elaborate party platforms. Finally, heroic action presents greater opportunities for self-enrichment.²¹

Heroic action is part of a political culture that represents both the greatest strength and the Achilles' heel of the Georgian government. On the one hand, thousands of houses were built in a matter of months, something that most international experts had warned was impossible to achieve. On the other hand, construction at breakneck speed has had an impact on quality,

¹⁸ Saakashvili publicly claimed, not implausibly, that his government had constructed the new houses in the same time it would have taken international organizations just to do the preliminary paperwork. See Civil Georgia, "Saakashvili Delivers State of Nation Address," Civil Georgia, February 12, 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20421> (accessed March 20, 2009).

¹⁹ Similarly, it has been argued that Mao Zedong's personal love of heroic revolutionary activities strongly influenced his subsequent actions as statesman. See Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

²⁰ In the words of an expatriate news editor who is a long-term resident of Tbilisi, "everything must be an exceptional triumph". Interview with the author, Tbilisi, March 2006.

²¹ Unconfirmed rumors indicate that at least some construction companies have still not been paid in full for their work on the new villages. Meanwhile, international donors have fully refunded the government for its officially documented expenditures on some of the villages. The author was unable to find any company willing to discuss this issue, even off the record.

necessitating retrofitting and repairs, a mundane task that may never be completed once the heroic momentum has passed and the issue drops off the leadership radar.

Vanguard Politics

Interviews with displaced people²² reveal that they were neither informed of nor consulted about the government's plans for their future. Even now, after the immediate crisis has passed, there is a striking lack of awareness among the displaced about what their rulers hope to do with them. Similarly, the media has not been briefed, opposition parties are in the dark, and the issue has hardly been touched upon in parliament.²³ This is typical of the National Movement's vanguard politics. The leadership prides itself on having achieved the impossible in its quest to build a modern nation state: in a matter of years, Georgians have been provided with electricity, decent roads, and personal security.

These very real successes have created a sense of manifest destiny and even infallibility amongst the ruling inner circle (only recently checked by the humiliating defeat in the war of August 2008). The average Georgian is seen as a beneficiary rather than as a citizen, and the key unit of reference is less the individual than the "sacred Georgian nation". As a result, the National Movement sees little if any value in providing information or requesting input, and actively shuns making public commitments to detailed plans today that would restrain its capacity for unfettered heroic action tomorrow. As a result, the leadership's style is a blend of "the people are ignorant" and "trust us, we know best".²⁴

Those who question the government's wisdom are perceived as ignorant, hostile, or both – with some justice. While basic literacy rates in Georgia approach 100 percent,²⁵ the gap between the frequently Western-educated ruling elite and the bulk of the population is huge. Domestic politics revolves around personality clashes, slanderous defamations and conspiracy theories; fact-based argumentation is rare and does not win votes. Furthermore, many opposition figures are intellectually challenged, severely tainted by corruption and/or suspected of receiving funding from abroad. Due to a lack of broad-based human capacity, the government currently possesses the only team capable of running a country, a priceless asset in a winner-takes-all political culture where the term "constructive criticism" is widely regarded as an oxymoron. Any independent attempt at policy analysis is further stymied by lack of access to information on leadership plans, the scarcity of quality think-tanks, and a media comprised of politically polarized television stations and newspapers that lack editorial independence, professionalism and readership.

²² The author has personally interviewed over twenty individuals displaced in 2008, and can draw on the experience of TI Georgia's aid monitoring team, which collectively has interviewed over 100 people in the mushroom villages.

²³ It should be pointed out that public distrust towards parliament is traditionally extremely low, and has declined even further since its boycott by much of the opposition. See Transparency International Georgia, "Public Opinion Survey on Georgian Parliament" (Tbilisi: TI Georgia, 2008).

²⁴ The parallels with the international aid industry's attitudes towards its Georgian "beneficiaries" are striking. See, for example, Transparency International Georgia "Aid to Georgia: Transparency, Accountability and the JNA" (Tbilisi: TI Georgia, November 17, 2008), <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/JBRN-7LGKT2?OpenDocument> (accessed April 13, 2009).

²⁵ UNDP, "Georgia Human Development Report 2008" (Tbilisi: UNDP, 2008).

The National Movement regards itself as a vanguard party with the democratically-mandated historic mission of dragging a nation of ignorant and culturally backward semi-peasants towards their European destiny. Transparency is not required as the leaders are to be trusted²⁶ based on their past track record in providing goods and services, consultation merely distracts²⁷ from producing the benefits for the masses on which legitimacy is built, accountability begins and ends at the ballot box, and criticism of the government between election dates is irrelevant at best.

Conclusion

The four traits characteristic of National Movement governance militate against simplistic black-and-white views of Georgia's ruling team. Cynics regularly overlook that fact that while the National Movement includes plenty of avaricious individuals, the leadership has staffed many key administrative positions with smart and honest people dedicated to the ideal of restoring national pride by building a modern nation free from want. Foreign critics in particular, few of whom have personal memories of the bad old days under Shevardnadze, often draw unfavorable comparisons based on the government's vacuous rhetoric of Georgia as a European country, forgetting what Saakashvili's team inherited just five years ago: a fragmented failed state hollowed out by corruption and rife with crime, run by a loose coalition of gangsters and kleptocrats unwilling to provide even the most basic of services to their countrymen,²⁸ with no tradition of democracy or rule of law, drained of its best and brightest by one of the highest outmigration rates in the world, populated by a disoriented people culturally torn between the twelfth century,²⁹ Stalin's heyday and gangster rap.

While the National Movement's style of governance can drive diplomats to despair with its lack of structure, aversion to forward planning, disdain for transparency and non-existent procedural accountability, it is important to realize that abandoning formally agreed-upon plans in the pursuit of novel heroic quests does not always constitute an act of bad faith, and that transactions between insiders that take place outside the public view are not necessarily always corrupt.

Conversely, the rose-tinted apologists for the president and his tight inner circle tend to overlook that Saakashvili's Georgia is not a democracy, except (arguably) in a strictly procedural sense. In Georgia, power has never changed hands through the ballot; the one election in Georgia's history whose outcome was not crystal clear in advance directly led to the "Rose Revolution". The National Movement's popular mandate does not rest on abstract values like civil liberties, human rights or freedom of the press, all of which were devalued during Shevardnadze's rule, when years of political freedoms failed to produce a decent government, let alone three meals a day. While the rhetoric of democracy may have generated considerable support abroad, the National Movement's legitimacy at home

²⁶ Lili di Puppo, "Anti-Corruption Interventions in Georgia: From Rhetoric to Practice," (paper presented at the Changing Europe Summer School, Bremen, July 28-August 2, 2008), http://www.changing-europe.org/download/Summer_School_2008/Di_Puppo.pdf (accessed March 20, 2009).

²⁷ MRA minister Koba Subeliani is a notable exception to this rule.

²⁸ For a personal account of life in Tbilisi in the late 1990s, see Wendell Steavenson, *Stories I Stole* (London: Grove Press, 2004).

²⁹ Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (London: Taurus, 1989).

squarely rests on a heroic nation-building mission whose sincerity is demonstrated³⁰ by the implementation of relentlessly propagandized high-profile heroic projects and the delivery of tangible benefits to ordinary Georgians.

³⁰ For a fascinating discussion of building popular legitimacy through visible outputs, see Sian Lazar, “Citizens Despite the State: Everyday Corruption and Local Politics in El Alto, Bolivia” in *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Cris Shore and Dieter Haller (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 212-228.