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## Georgia On Their Minds: A Year After South Ossetia, What Will Happen Next?

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As the international press observes the one year anniversary of the Russian strike into the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the scenes grow hauntingly familiar. Russian troops occupying South Ossetia are shown raising their flag at one of the three military bases they have established there. Vice President Joe Biden makes a state visit to the Georgian capital of Tblisi and tells members of the parliament: “We call upon Russia to withdraw all its forces from your terrain.”

And, as it was during the five-day war of August 2008, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili is ubiquitous on television and in print. He warns interviewers that Russia wants to “put an end to Georgian statehood,” that the Russian strike last summer (which resulted in 1,000 deaths, 600 of them civilians) has cost Georgia its much-desired entrance into NATO.

Since he caught the world’s attention during the Russian strike, the Columbia-educated Saakashvili has been a figure of controversy. As the public face of the first outside nation to face Russian firepower since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan nearly three decades ago, Saakashvili draws obvious sympathy and warmth. To many he is the modern equivalent of Hungary’s Naj in 1956 and Czechoslovakia’s Dubcek in 1968 -- the underdog leader who stands defiantly as the Russian tanks roll in.

As to his democratic credentials, admirers like to point out that Saakashvili was the leader of the bloodless “Rose Revolution” that toppled the heavy-handed regime of Eduard Shevardnadze in 2004.

### A Second Opinion on Saakashvili

But there are second opinions, as I learned during a recent interview with the woman considered Saakashvili’s leading political opponent: Nino Burjanadze, former speaker of the Georgian parliament and now head of the Democratic Movement for a United

Georgia.

Over coffee at Washington's Café du Barque, my first question to Burjanzadze was an obvious one: will she seek the presidency of her country in 2013, when arch-rival Saakashvili has said he will step down.

"Yes," she replied without hesitation, "if we have elections."

For all of the Georgian president's image in the world press as the voice for democracy, Burjanzadze recalled the heavy-handed police response to demonstrations against the Saakashvili government in 2007. The protests were led by several opposition groups amid charges of corruption and murders by the President's onetime associate Irakli Okruashvili. Both Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group criticized the force used against the demonstrators.

Saakashvili has been "taking undemocratic steps." Specifically, she cited what she considers "no real or free judiciary, the police used for pressure, and property rights of [his] political opponents violated many times." In addition, she recalled how in 2007, Saakashvili arranged for an earlier-than-usual presidential election the following year and he won handily. Hence, her worries that there may not be elections at all in 2013.

In Georgia, its two breakaway provinces, and much of the world, debate exists over who started the five-day war of 2007. Andrei Illarionov, once chief economic adviser to Vladimir Putin and now a bitter critic (he currently works as a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington), has written the Russia must be blamed for most of the "provocation."

But there is another opinion, that Saakashvili is responsible. Ronald Asmus of the German Marshall Fund, author of a book on the Russian-Georgian war, maintains that the Georgian President "began a war his key allies had repeatedly warned him not to start and that he could not win. It is easier to start than to stop a war -- as Tbilisi discovered when it was forced to accept an unjust peace to survive."

Bujanadze takes the second point of view -- that Saakashvili could have avoided a confrontation over the two provinces. The negative results of the five-day war, she strongly feels, outweigh anything Saakashvili was trying to achieve. As she told me, "We've lost more than 20% of our country's territory. We've lost the possibility of joining NATO and joining the European Union is just an illusion now. The world

economic crisis has caused unemployment and the loss of our territory a year ago has made it worse.”

Bujanadze (who was actually acting President after Shevardnadze relinquished power in '04 and Saakashvili came to power) will get a chance to make her case over the next three years. Georgia will have local elections in 2010, parliamentary elections in 2011, and the presidential election in 2013.

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