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LETTER FROM

## Letter From Tbilisi

Russia On Their Mind

James Kirchick

*JAMES KIRCHICK is Writer-at-Large with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and a Contributing Editor for The New Republic.*

On Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main drag, the Museum of the Soviet Occupation stands right across from Georgia's national parliament. Constructed in 2006, the museum takes visitors through the history of Georgia's encounter with the Soviet Union, from the Red Army's invasion in 1921, through the mass murder of the Georgian political and cultural leadership over the following decades, all the way up to the end of the Cold War and Georgia's declaration of independence in 1991. Not long after the museum opened, then Russian President Vladimir Putin complained about it directly to his Georgian counterpart, the young and exuberantly pro-Western Mikheil Saakashvili, protesting what he considered to be its anti-Russian tone. After all, he pointed out, some of the most ruthless figures in the Soviet hierarchy -- including Joseph Stalin and Lavrenty Beria -- were themselves Georgian. Saakashvili responded sarcastically that Russia was free to open a museum to memorialize Georgian oppression of Russians, and that he would even donate the funds.

The occupation museum is not just about documenting the past; it also seeks to address the present. Take the quote embossed on a wall from Noe Zhordania, the journalist who led the Georgian government in exile from the initiation of the Soviet occupation until his death in 1953: "Soviet Russia offered us [a] military alliance, which we rejected. We have taken different paths, they are heading for the East and we, for the West." Hanging on the wall near the exhibit's exit is a map of Georgia with the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia marked in dark red, a result of their being occupied by Russia since the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008. (In addition to Russia, Nauru, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are the only countries that recognize the territories as independent.) Tour guides refer visitors to a 1955 report issued by the U.S. Congress' erstwhile Select Committee on Communist Aggression titled "Communist Takeover and Occupation of Georgia," copies of which are distributed at the museum's entrance. The message, as my guide said: "The Bolsheviks could not tolerate an independent Georgia on its border," and neither can the Kremlin today.

Georgia recently marked two important milestones in its development as a small, embattled democracy in a tough neighborhood. On May 26, thousands of Georgians poured into Tbilisi to celebrate their independence day. The country staged its first military parade since the 2008 war, and Saakashvili warned of the continuing threat from "outside forces."

A few days later, Georgians voted for the first time since the war in local elections that, while hinging on municipal-level issues and not foreign policy, nonetheless demonstrated widespread concern about Russia. Despite criticism that he foolishly led Georgia into war against its giant neighbor, Saakashvili's United National Movement won a resounding victory with over 65 percent of the vote. The lackluster performance of the country's opposition led to the dissolution of the Alliance for Georgia, the main opposition party.

Visiting Georgia last month on a trip sponsored by its government, I met with several members of the radical non-parliamentary opposition, who protest against Saakashvili in the street. They were vehement in denouncing their president, at times likening him to Putin. But even they were steadfast in insisting that Russia should end its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and that Georgia should join NATO and the European Union. (One [recent poll](#) [1] found that 83 percent of Georgians consider Russia to be the country's greatest security threat. [Another](#) [2] revealed that 56 percent believe that the government's "first priority" should be to "restore territorial integrity"; "create more jobs" came in second with 33 percent.)

Attempting to move west has been Georgia's great project since 2003, when the popular Rose Revolution ousted Eduard Shevardnadze, a corrupt former Soviet bureaucrat, from the presidency. Leading the effort today are Western-oriented leaders who are almost uniformly young.

The government ministries in Tbilisi feel more like the offices of McKinsey & Company than the bureaucracies of a developing, "functional but imperfect democracy," as one young Foreign Ministry official put it to me. European Union flags stand alongside Georgian ones in the marbled hallways. In his parliamentary office, David Bakradze -- the 38-year-old speaker whose waiting room walls are covered with photos of him beaming alongside Western leaders from Nancy Pelosi to David Cameron -- proudly recounted what former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar used to say when he advised Saakashvili on economics: "What I dreamed I couldn't do in Estonia, I am doing here." Indeed, the young Turks running the country repeat libertarian mantras that bring to mind a CATO Institute confab. "You cannot create jobs by job redistribution, only by job creation," one of Saakashvili's senior economic advisers says.

Soon after taking office, Saakashvili introduced a flurry of economic reforms, imposing a flat tax, deregulating and privatizing state enterprises (from an aerospace manufacturing firm to cargo shipping concerns) left over from the Soviet period, and launching an anti-corruption campaign that won Georgia the World Bank's coveted "number one reformer" designation in the 2007 Doing Business Survey. Saakashvili is now pushing a constitutional amendment known as the Economic Liberty Act, which will mandate a referendum on all future tax increases, prohibit the creation of new regulatory agencies, limit the number of licenses required for doing business, cap the budget deficit at 3 percent of GDP, and top the national debt at 60 percent of GDP. In addition to these economic moves, Georgia has contributed troops to the NATO mission in Afghanistan and the American-led effort in Iraq, part of its broader attempt to prove its pro-Western bona fides.

Georgia is by far the most developed country in the Caucasus, both economically and politically. To be sure, its democracy has shortcomings; according to observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union, last month's election had "deficiencies in the legal framework, its implementation, an uneven playing field, and isolated cases of election-day fraud." But multiple parties compete for power, a free media is developing, and Georgia ranks 67th out of 179 nations in Transparency International's annual index of corruption.

Still, this small country cannot escape the fact that it is caught between a West that needs Russian cooperation on a host of issues -- from energy to Iran -- and a Kremlin security bureaucracy that essentially views it as a lost province. Georgia remains stuck -- unable, of course, to become the 51st state and unwilling to become a Russian vassal either.

Under Saakashvili, the Georgian government has tried to manage its difficult situation by joining NATO. Doing so would afford Georgia protection under the alliance's Article V mutual defense pact and symbolically tie the country to the West. Although the Georgian people have long registered strong support for joining the Atlantic alliance, such feelings might be weakening. Whereas a 2008 [poll](#) [3] found that 86 percent of Georgians either strongly or somewhat supported NATO membership, only 52 percent did in a [poll](#) [3] released in May. This increasing ambivalence toward Western institutions is not an indication of disillusionment with their ideals, but a frustrated response to those institutions' reluctance to accept Georgia: European and U.S. leaders have for years claimed to welcome Georgia's involvement in the Euro-Atlantic community, but they have reacted feebly to Russian attempts to keep Georgia within its "sphere of privileged interests."

At the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, the alliance declined to grant Georgia a Membership Action Plan, instead issuing a vague promise that bringing Georgia (and Ukraine, a more controversial prospect) into NATO would be an eventual goal. Now, two years later, Russia has invaded Georgia, illegally recognizes two breakaway provinces as independent countries, and stands in violation of multiple provisions of the EU-brokered cease-fire, behavior for which there appears to be no consequence. If anything, Russia is being rewarded; last month, the EU [floated a proposal](#) [4] to withdraw its special envoy to the Caucasus in spite of protests from leaders in the region and in Eastern Europe, where support for Georgia against Moscow has been especially vocal.

Two other former Soviet republics demonstrate the difficulty of attempting to reform in Russia's shadow. To Georgia's west, the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich became president of Ukraine in January, reversing gains made by the 2005 Orange Revolution that brought the more Western-oriented Viktor Yushchenko to power. And to Georgia's east, the central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan was the scene of bloody, Russian-stoked riots in April that took the lives of over 80 people and ousted Kurmanbek Bakiyev from the presidency. One Georgian official termed Bakiyev's removal -- and Russia's hand in it -- an "eye-opener."

Over a lavish *supra* -- what Georgians call their dinner table -- an intelligence official warned of what he termed the "Kyrgyzstan scenario," in which Russia overthrows a regime not by military force but with soft power -- manipulating the media, fomenting ethnic conflict, co-opting opposition politicians, and applying economic pressure. This was how Russia helped turn public sentiment against Bakiyev. The proximate cause of the rift between the former Kyrgyz president and the Kremlin was his renegeing on a deal to evict U.S. forces from a Kyrgyz military base. In response, the Russian-language media relentlessly attacked him, weakening his already low popularity. More important, the Kremlin increased tariffs on gas exports to Kyrgyzstan just days before popular anger boiled over into riots. These external pressures, combined with Bakiyev's own lousy record, led to a perfect storm: over two days, a crowd of just 5,000 people overthrew the regime and installed a provisional government of opposition leaders who stumbled over one another in offering profuse thanks to Moscow in general, and to Vladimir Putin in particular.

To be sure, there are some similarities between the pre-revolutionary situation in Kyrgyzstan and the current political climate in Georgia. Georgia is currently the victim of a one-way economic boycott from Russia, which prevents it from selling goods in the large Russian market. And, as Parliamentary Speaker Bakradze points out, Georgia has "a

history of street rallies." Indeed, it was street protests that brought down Shevardnadze in 2003, as they did the first president of post-Soviet Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in 1992.

Fortunately for Georgians, however, street rallies are not the only way they conduct politics. This is one reason why Georgia is less likely to suffer a reverse velvet revolution à la Kyrgyzstan, where Bakiyev gradually cut off most avenues of political expression. Georgia has a vocal parliamentary opposition, and although Saakashvili has occasionally cracked down on media that criticize his administration and has violently dispersed opposition rallies, critics do campaign against him and routinely share their views in a variety of news outlets. Nor does Saakashvili routinely jail his political opponents. Moreover, corruption is far less entrenched in Georgia than it is in Kyrgyzstan.

Yet Georgian leaders persist in warning of the Kyrgyz scenario. After deadly ethnic riots rocked southern Kyrgyzstan last month, one Georgian minister claimed that Russia has been behind the "ethnic cleansing" of Uzbeks. Indeed, Georgians see a Russian hand in everything that goes wrong in the region; about half of Georgians believe that the Kremlin was responsible for the April plane crash that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski.

It is too easy to reduce these fears to mere paranoia. Of the three former Soviet states to undergo "color" revolutions in the last decade, only Georgia's has endured. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has various military tools with which it can pursue its goal of regime change. With Abkhazia, Russia controls a strategic Black Sea port. And with over 5,000 military personnel based in South Ossetia, only 30 miles from the Georgian capital, it can credibly threaten to decapitate the Tbilisi government. It may be difficult to imagine Russia making such a daring move, but few in the West predicted the August 2008 war either.

Alternatively, Russia could reabsorb Georgia into its orbit by weakening Tbilisi's economic independence and political sovereignty. Indeed, the less Georgia can depend on the economic and diplomatic strength of the West, the more it will have to set its own course. Georgians who feel spurned by the West may even feel inclined to support the handful of marginal opposition politicians who have recently traveled to Moscow for [meetings with Putin](#) [5]. Were this scenario to play out, it would be as much the West's fault as Russia's.

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[1] <http://jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com/2010/04/iris-public-opinion-research-in-georgia.html>

[2] <http://iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-releases-survey-georgian-public-opinion-2>

[3] <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22275>

[4] [http://www.rferl.org/content/EU\\_Plans\\_To\\_Scrap\\_South\\_Caucasus\\_Moldova\\_Envoys/2057672.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/EU_Plans_To_Scrap_South_Caucasus_Moldova_Envoys/2057672.html)

[5] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/russianow/politics/7456514/Georgian-opposition-leader-Nino-Burjanadze-on-meeting-Russias-Prime-Minister-Vladimir-Putin.html>