

## **GEORGIA: PRESIDENT MIKHAIL SAKASHVILI, MORE ISOLATED THAN EVER**

*By Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Renaud FRANCOIS  
ESISC Research Associate*

Saturday, 13 March 2010. 8.00 pm. Tbilisi. At the time when the local television stations broadcast their traditional evening news programme, one of the main channels, *Imedi (Hope)*, touches off panic. The presenter, Natia Koberidze, very briefly and discreetly delivers a piece of fiction intended to illustrate what might happen in Georgia after disturbances break out across the country following the publication of the results of municipal elections scheduled for 30 May 2010. The news report *Kronika* is replaced by a bogus programme.

Viewers were in shock and dismay as they heard how the Russians had invaded the country and the population fled. In Tbilisi, thousands of demonstrators were said to be headed in all directions while tanks approached and Russian planes bombed the city. The President was supposedly seized and there were reports of his death. Opposition leaders took over the government. They wanted to hand over to the invaders the keys to the country. Russian President Dimitri Medvedev announced the end of the contemptible regime of Saakashvili. Hillary Clinton and Nicolas Sarkozy were flying to Moscow. President Obama was delivering a speech in Washington. Images were aired again and again. They illustrated and supported the statements of journalists: street scenes, the President, the wounded, the demonstrations, the statements of ambassadors, interviews with leaders of the Opposition, etc.

This is the latest and most surprising manifestation of the highly theatrical political life and media experience complete with thunder bolts and flashes of lightning which has now gone on in Georgia for many years. It is the Georgian variation on a news broadcast in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> For the population of this country which has been a centre of high international tension for more than twenty years and been on the verge of nervous breakdown especially since the summer of 2008, the evening of Saturday, 13 March 2010 constituted a serious reminder that stability is still a distant dream in Georgia.

Apart from the emotional shock – panic-driven movements, overloaded telephone circuits, the looting of a service station in Gori, a number of persons stricken with cardiac complaints – the net result of this hoax – national criticism, international condemnation and an electrical jolt for the political opposition, which was brusquely aroused from its hibernation –

---

<sup>1</sup> On 13 December 2006, the Belgian television station RTBF broadcast a special news flash announcing the disintegration of the Belgian state. This announcement also was followed by pseudo-reports, each more realistic than the preceding one. They elicited deep emotion and grave shock among the general population as well as within the Belgian political class.

will leave a strong and long-lasting imprint on the end of the Saakashvili presidency, which is expected in late January 2013.

Whether it was wished or not, whether supported or not, this case of the bogus *Kronika* broadcast could not have come at a worse moment for the media hero who overthrew Édward Shevardnadze. He was propelled right up to the front, while he has appeared more and more isolated and weakened both in the eyes of his compatriots and on the international scene.

## 1. A hoax which was no laughing matter

### a) Between international condemnations...

As the hoax reveals, the condemnations have been unanimous and unqualified. Immediately afterwards, John Bass, the U.S. ambassador in Georgia, said that *'the broadcast of the Imedi television channel is irresponsible and such behaviour is at the opposite extreme from journalistic ethics.'*<sup>2</sup> Éric Fournier, the French ambassador, who appeared in this false reportage<sup>3</sup> together with the ambassadors of the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic, believes that *'the Imedi channel has made a serious dent in its journalistic reputation and this reporting is completely inadmissible.'*<sup>4</sup> He strongly condemned the use of archival images in which he appeared. Denis Keefe, ambassador of the United Kingdom, also condemned the use of his image in the bogus reportage.

Representative of the OSCE for freedom of the press, Dunja Mijatovic, deplored the *'irresponsible character of this reportage.'*<sup>5</sup> For its part, the *EUMM - European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia* – issued a communiqué denouncing *'a dangerous report which could lead to a serious deterioration of the situation in the region.'*<sup>6</sup> Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, also was not silent. He attributed responsibility for this affair to the *'political paranoia of the Georgian leaders who have caused serious damage to the security and stability of the region.'*<sup>7</sup>

NATO reacted in a way that was most revealing of the state of exasperation which this affair prompted in international organisations. When asked about this incident, the spokesman for NATO, James Appathurai, said he considered it to have been *'useless and out-of-place'*<sup>8</sup> and, while not linking this affair in any way to the question of Georgia's entry into NATO, he nonetheless allowed himself to add that *'Georgia's joining is certainly not a matter for tomorrow and over the long term the Georgian authorities still have a number of fundamental reforms to undertake.'*<sup>9</sup>

### b) ... and presidential complacency...

Dispatched to the site of the hoax, in the studios of *Imedi*, the spokesperson for the presidency, Manana Manjgaladzé, expressed on behalf of President Saakashvili her *'concern and fears.'*<sup>10</sup> She reproached the channel for *'not having sufficiently indicated the fictional nature of the broadcast.'*<sup>11</sup> A warning message at the bottom of the screen running during the

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22082>

<sup>3</sup> *Imedi* illustrated its false reporting with real archival filmed material dating from the war of August 2008

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22094>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22118&search=NATO>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22080>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

entire broadcast of the bogus news programme could have eliminated all ambiguity and prevented any misunderstanding. Many members of the presidential majority also criticised the televised broadcast.

The personal reaction of President Mikhail Saakashvili the next day during a visit to the district of Bolnisi was more ambiguous. After very briefly criticising *Imedi* for not having run a warning message on the screen that this was a fictional account, he maintained that the scenario was plausible: *'The most disagreeable aspect of yesterday's reporting, and I want everyone to be aware of it, is that this broadcast came very close to reality and showed perfectly what could happen ... in August 2008 the enemy began to screen a film that was very bad for Georgia ... we succeeded in interrupting its dissemination but we cannot ignore the fact that the film maker is still pursuing his version of the scenario for a remake similar to the fictional work presented yesterday.'*<sup>12</sup>

While praising the realism of the false reporting, Mikhail Saakashvili reminded people that Opposition leader Nino Burjanadze recently met Vladimir Putin in Moscow and *'the handshake with a man whose hands are covered with Georgian blood proves that she has no sense of dignity.'*<sup>13</sup> The Georgian President did not even seek to dispel the suspicion that the dissemination of the false news show was conceived and used by the highest governmental circles for their own purposes.

### **c) ... the Opposition rouses itself and mobilises**

After a springtime of continuous demonstrations which paralysed the capital from April to June 2009 – the grant finale was reached on 26 May<sup>14</sup> - the fever steadily decreased with the onset of summer and ever since then the Opposition was in a semi-lethargic state.

On 13 March, slightly before 21.00, when the live debate following the broadcast of the *Kronika* news programme had just begun, the political Opposition, especially the leaders targeted by the bogus programme<sup>15</sup>, organised a spontaneous demonstration which brought together between 200 and 300 persons at most in front of the *Imedi* headquarters. Some major Opposition figures appeared there alongside organisations from civil society and groups of anonymous enraged citizens.

But apart from several terms of abuse and slogans, the various Opposition parties appeared to be disorganised and not very willing to undertake a more sustained action. Nonetheless, they decided to announce a public rally for the next day, thereby organising the first demonstration of the year, well in advance of the calendar they had set previously with a view to the municipal elections scheduled for the end of May.

After several days of reflection, it seems that most of the Opposition decided to make use of the event and ride the wave of popular indignation. On 22 March, a rally called by the *Labour Party* brought together the representatives of six other Opposition movements.<sup>16</sup> They all agreed on the need to coordinate their actions and decided to set up a working group led by

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22081>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> On this day more than 50,000 demonstrators celebrated the Georgian national holiday in the stadium of FC Dynamo and forced the authorities to cancel the traditional military parade.

<sup>15</sup> Nino Burjanadze, the former president of Parliament, and Zurab Nogaideli, former Prime Minister, were openly presented in the bogus news programme as agitators and traitors.

<sup>16</sup> Taking part in this meeting: the *Democratic Movement – Georgia United*, of Nino Burjanadze, the *Movement for a Just Georgia* of former Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli, the *Let's Defend Georgia Movement* of the former presidential candidate of the Opposition coalition in the 2008 elections Levan Gasheshiladze, the *Conservative Party*, the *Party of the People*, the *Freedom Party* of the son of former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the *Labour Party* of Gogi Topadze.

Giorgi Khaindrava, the former Minister of State for Conflict Resolution, charged with the task of establishing a common strategy and an action plan to win power.<sup>17</sup>

Three parties did not join this movement: *The Path of Georgia* led by Salome Zurbashvili, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, the *Christian Democrats* and the *Alliance for Georgia* of Irakli Alasania, former adviser to the President and former ambassador to the United Nations. However, Giorgi Khaindrava has not lost hope that they will eventually join the movement launched on 22 March.

Whatever the motivations which led the senior management of programming at *Imedi* to broadcast the bogus news programme – whether these were sober political manoeuvres of servility or a real desire to inform – one of the unexpected consequences has thus been to awaken the Opposition and to re-launch, however timidly, the idea of a grand coalition of all the Opposition parties for the municipal elections. It remains to be seen whether the leaders of these parties will be able to rein in the demons which until now succeeded in dividing them more than uniting them.

Their credibility will be tested as the voting day (30 May) approaches and everything indicates that the mayor's office in Tbilisi could constitute a fine war prize. For the first time, the election of mayor will be held by direct ballot. On the basis of the voting results obtained by the Opposition candidate for President in January 2008<sup>18</sup> and by the various Opposition candidates in the legislative elections of the spring of 2008<sup>19</sup>, the party of the President, the *National Movement* is clearly in the minority in the capital.

There can be no doubt that the fall of Tbilisi to the Opposition would mark an interesting rebound which would necessarily seriously complicate the remainder of the second and final five-year term of Saakashvili.

## **2. A feeling of isolation**

Admired by the Western democracies, the *Rose Revolution* of 22 November 2003 seemed to satisfy the immense hopes of Georgians. It was the first in a series of three revolutions – the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine followed in 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan came in 2005. Like its younger sister in Ukraine, the Rose Revolution ended up experiencing the fate history reserves for bearers of disappointed hopes. Seven years later we must say that the roses and oranges have left behind only thorns and pits. Following the disastrous results of the war of August 2008, the Ukrainian 'defection' of 7 February 2010 did the most to strengthen the feeling of isolation.

### **a) The disastrous military adventure**

The disastrous military adventure of 7 August 2008 was tragic in a number of different ways. Some 162 soldiers were killed in battle and 8 disappeared.<sup>20</sup> Two hundred thirty civilians were killed and 1,800 were wounded.<sup>21</sup> Nearly 130,000 persons were displaced<sup>22</sup> according to the HCR of the United Nations, of whom 35,000 still have not been able to return to their homes. The two provinces of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia were lost following their official

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22111>

<sup>18</sup> Levan Gashechiladze, a candidate of the united Opposition, won in 8 of the capital's 10 voting districts with more than 40% of the votes and was more than 8 points ahead of Saakashvili.

<sup>19</sup> While the united bloc of the Opposition parties only won 2 seats out of the 10 deputy seats of the capital in the majority voting, the Opposition taken altogether held a majority of the votes cast in Tbilisi.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.ge/index.php?page=-10&Id=31&lang=1>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.ceig.ch/pdf/IFFMCG\\_Volume\\_I.pdf](http://www.ceig.ch/pdf/IFFMCG_Volume_I.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.colisee.org/article.php?id\\_article=2616](http://www.colisee.org/article.php?id_article=2616)

declaration of independence. This disaster will probably go down in history as the point of departure of the virtiginous fall in popularity of Georgia and of its President at the international level.

Many experts were skeptical and have said so: primary responsibility for the conflict of 7 to 12 August 2008 rests with Georgia. The report of the investigation ordered by the European Union confirmed this on 30 September 2009. A snub to President Saakashvili, one can read there that Tbilisi was responsible for unleashing the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008. This report also accuses Moscow of having reacted in a disproportionate manner and having encouraged ethnic cleansing.

The report wrings the neck of the thesis fiercely defended by the Georgian President who presented his offensive as an act of legitimate defence. In a separate communiqué, the president of the commission of investigation established by the European Union, the Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, clearly emphasises that *'from the point of view of the Commission it was Georgia who unleashed the war by attacking Tskhinvali with heavy artillery.'*<sup>23</sup>

Caught up in the presidential campaign which was running full tilt and without doubt already having burned its fingers on the unpredictable and uncontrollable character of Mikhail Saakashvili, the Bush Administration prudently abstained from any direct interference in the conflict and limited its actions to raising its voice against Moscow. What we heard was far from the impassioned statements – *'Georgia, beacon of freedom and democracy'* – uttered by George W. Bush during his visit to Tbilisi in May 2005. Since the accession to power of the Obama Administration and the warming of relations between Moscow and Washington, Georgia is no longer in the forefront as was the case before.

## **b) The Ukrainian defection**

Mikhail Saakashvili saw an alter ego in Viktor Yushchenko, who also came to power following a revolution, Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Yushchenko was someone with whom he could feel less isolated when engaged in his endless battle against Moscow. The government to government relations rapidly took a highly personalised turn in line with the longstanding friendship of these two leaders. Viktor Yushchenko is the godfather of one of Mikhail Saakashvili's children and he also keeps equally close relations with Yulia Tymoshenko, one of the first allies of the Ukrainian President and his last Prime Minister. Less than a year after the Orange Revolution, on 12 August 2005, the two men signed the *Declaration of Borjomi* which announced the creation of a *Community of Democratic Choice* and which hoped to *'unite all democratic states from the regions of the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.'*<sup>24</sup> This was a seductive idea, especially to the Bush Administration, which was always concerned to see Russian influence reduced within the post-Soviet space in the name of the doctrine of containment.

The first attempt to form a geopolitical counterweight to Russia and its allies within the Community of Independent States (CIS) was the creation of the so-called GUAM alliance (Georgia - Ukraine - Azerbaijan - Moldavia) which emerged in the middle of the 1990s with the very active and benevolent support of the United States. However, this initiative turned out to be ineffective and did not really function. The member states of this alliance did not succeed in agreeing with one another in the economic and political domains. Moreover, they focused above all on their personal problems and domestic crises, preferring to manage their relations with Russia in a bilateral framework rather than in a collective manner, using an institution empowered to deal with foreign policy and common security.

---

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/pour-l-ue-c-est-la-georgie-a-ouvert-les-hostilites\\_791340.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/pour-l-ue-c-est-la-georgie-a-ouvert-les-hostilites_791340.html)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=5&sm=2&id=451>

Svante Cornell, a specialist on the Caucasus, an analyst attached to Johns Hopkins University and the editor of the bimonthly journal *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*<sup>25</sup> produced by the *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center* said during an interview published by the online magazine *Caucas.com* that ‘*Georgian aspirations to attain the status of regional power [via the proposal of a Community of Democratic Choice, ed.] could only be prejudicial to Georgia’s interests since they were unrealistic and diverted the attention of the authorities from the main and obvious priorities of building a state worthy of the name and continuing the process of reforms.*’<sup>26</sup> He urged everyone, both Georgian and international political actors, ‘*to turn their back on megalomania and scrupulously avoid carrying and maintaining this type of idea, whose promotion, in reality is going to go against the most urgent interests of Georgia.*’<sup>27</sup>

As soon as the victory of Viktor Yanukovich seemed more than likely and even before it was officially announced, President Saakashvili hastened to congratulate the man who defeated Yulia Tymoshenko. He added that ‘*this election which sanctifies the victory of Ukrainian democracy does not put in question and will not put in question the strategic partnership which unites Tbilisi and Kiev.*’<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, many observers believe that the victory of Yanukovich will result in a certain cooling of relations between the two capitals, at least initially. In the view of Ghia Nodia, a political analyst and teacher at the *Ilia Shavshavadze State University*, ‘*the victory of Yanukovich is an unpleasant but not catastrophic event for Georgia.*’<sup>29</sup> Despite the posture of the new President, who is opposed to the integration of Ukraine within NATO and wishes to recognise the two separatist republics of Georgia, Ghia Nodia thinks that the Saakashvili Administration does not have too much to fear from the accession to power of Viktor Yanukovich. Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation of International and Strategic Studies, believes that the ‘*big gap between the Ukraine’s pro-Russia voters, on the one hand, and the voters favoring the Western powers on the other hand, will lead Viktor Yanukovich to arrive at and demonstrate realism.*’<sup>30</sup>

The day after the victory of Viktor Yanukovich, President Saakashvili pointed out to the parliamentary representatives of his majority some lessons from this election. In his view, the inability of the Ukrainian government to maintain the unity of the country seemed to be the main reason for the failure of the Yushchenko team. He also considered it worthwhile to put his majority on guard lest an identical fate overtake Georgia if its ruling classes and its elites did not succeed in reaching an understanding on the essential problems and on maintaining the unity of the country. Without naming them, he also denounced in passing the radical elements who, both within and outside the country, are working against Georgia. Coming several days before the broadcast of the bogus *Kronika* programme in which the reputations of two of the best known Opposition figures were called into question and they were accused of treason, this advance denunciation derives all of its sense and its value in that context.

To marshal his troops, the President concluded this meeting by going over the comparative results of Georgia and Ukraine. From the numbers he presented, it appears that Georgia outclasses Ukraine in all domains. GDP per capita stands at \$2,930 versus \$2,700 in Ukraine. Georgia jumped 77 places ahead of Ukraine in the fight against corruption, while Ukraine remains at the bottom of this ranking. Georgia is ranked 11th worldwide in terms of business climate, while Ukraine is in the 120<sup>th</sup> place. Georgia has risen 99 places in the criterion of economic freedom, to reach the 32<sup>nd</sup> place worldwide, far ahead of Ukraine, which, together with Russia is stuck in the 133<sup>rd</sup> rank. The table is quite idyllic. As the

---

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.cacianalyst.org/>

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.caucas.com/home/breve\\_contenu.php?id=286](http://www.caucas.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=286)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21960&search>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.geotimes.ge/index.php?m=home&newsid=20435>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

President himself said : ‘We are in the course of turning Georgia into one of the most beautiful places on earth, if not the most magnificent place.’<sup>31</sup>

During these past few years, Viktor Yushchenko’s Ukraine has served as a bridge for European and Western ambitions of Georgia. To be sure, it was not the only one, but nonetheless it was a major link. Notwithstanding all the bad aspects that President Saakashvili may think up now, Ukraine has a geopolitical and economic weight that is otherwise much greater than that of Georgia. Geographically Kiev is much closer to the heart of Europe than Tbilisi and Ukraine occupies an essential strategic place as regards delivery of gas supplies to Europe. It will always be more difficult for Westerners and Europeans to ignore the NATO and European ambitions of Ukraine than to send away Tbilisi empty-handed. In addition, the context is presently very grave for a Georgia which feels more and more isolated. This is particularly so after the visit of Dimitri Medvedev to Paris at the beginning of March, a visit which concluded with the opening of negotiations over an arms contract involving the sale by France to Russia of four Mistral vessels for the Russian Navy.

### 3. Conclusion

The affair of the bogus *Kronika* reveals the growing isolation of Mikhail Saakashvili. After having systematically seen his main assistants and partners join the ranks of the Opposition - including Nino Burjanadze, former president of Parliament, Zurab Nogadeli, former Prime Minister, Salome Zurbishvili, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Irakli Alassania, former ambassador to the United Nations, and Giorgi Khaindrava, former Minister of State for Conflict Resolution – the President, whose term in office ends only in 2013, is without doubt forced to admit that the question of his succession is already on the table.

The revelations of 15 March on the internet certainly appear to indicate that the struggle for the post of President will be fierce. On that day an internet user put on line two recorded telephone conversations. In the first, the interlocutors were said to be the director of *Imedi* and his assistant. The man confirmed having received the backing of the President for the broadcast of the bogus news programme. The director of *Imedi*, Giorgi Arveladze, acknowledges it is his voice but denounces the recording as a composite put together in a sound studio.<sup>32</sup> The second, put on line shortly thereafter, is supposed to have taken place between President Saakashvili and the Georgian Minister of Culture. These two dialogues are now being verified for authenticity.

Certain experts, as well as circles close to the government believe that these revelations were the work of the FSB - the federal bureau of state security of the Russian Federation – which has sought, with the blessing of the Kremlin, to denigrate and weaken the Georgian President. Others believe, on the contrary, that the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili, who is thought to wield exceptional power in Georgia, was behind these revelations. His objective would have been to remind the President and other possible candidates to the succession of his power, with a view to positioning himself for the presidential election of 2013.

The bogus *Kronika* show played in a totally irresponsible manner with images that were all catastrophic, including a massive surrender of the Army. The hoax dangerously suggests that fear and the idea of victimisation, which are perpetually brandished by the government authorities, and by Mikhail Saakashvili in particular, permanently pervades the daily life of the Georgian population.

---

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/2041\\_february\\_10\\_2010/2041\\_eto.html](http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/2041_february_10_2010/2041_eto.html)

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22088>

Fear of Russia is perfectly understandable and legitimate in Georgia. But if this feeling of fear and the impression of endless victimisation which follows from it are used to the point of becoming the two sole and unique sociological characteristics of the Georgian population, then one may conclude that Moscow has won without having the need to fire a single additional shot.

**Copyright © ESISC 2010**