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*Coup in Georgia (Republic): Recent Developments and
Implications*

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Coup in Georgia [Republic]: Recent Developments and Implications

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Summary

This report examines the ouster of Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze in the wake of a legislative election that many Georgians viewed as not free and fair. Implications for Georgia and U.S. interests are discussed. This report may be updated as events warrant. See also CRS Report 97-727, *Georgia*; and CRS Issue Brief IB95024, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, updated regularly.

Background¹

Former President Eduard Shevardnadze had led Georgia since 1972, except for 1985-1992, during which he primarily served as the pro-Western foreign minister of the Soviet Union. Shevardnadze's constitutional limit of two terms in office expired in 2005, which made the November 2, 2003, legislative election a critical bell-weather of who might succeed him. Nine party blocs and twelve parties contested 150 legislative seats in a party list vote, and another 75 seats were contested in single constituencies.

Shevardnadze's party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), had become deeply unpopular as economic conditions failed to noticeably improve. To strengthen its chances in the election, in April 2003 the CUG formed an alliance termed "For a New Georgia" (FNG) with other pro-Shevardnadze parties. Three opposition parties that had split from the CUG contested for seats: the National Movement (led by former Justice Minister Mikhail Saakashvili); the United Democrats (led by former Speaker Zurab Zhvania and Speaker Nino Burjanadze); and the businessmen-led New Right Party. Other major parties included the Revival Party (led by Ajaria's regional leader Aslan Abashidze), and the populist Labor Party. Campaigning tended to focus on personal attacks rather than ideology or platforms. Saakashvili called for forcing Shevardnadze to resign, raising pensions and wages, taxing the rich, and fighting corruption. Abashidze also criticized

¹ Sources for this report include the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Central Eurasia: Daily Report*; *Eurasia Insight*; *Johnson's List*; the State Department's *Washington File*; and *Reuters*, *Agence France Presse* (AFP), *Associated Press* (AP), and other newswires.

Shevardnadze's policies, but some observers speculated that Revival and FNG had covertly formed an alliance (Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Caucasus Election Watch*, Oct. 27). The pro-Shevardnadze and opposition camps both appealed to nationalism by accusing each other of selling out Georgia's sovereignty to Russia.

Post-Election Crisis

The observer mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported on November 3 that the electoral processes appeared somewhat more democratic than in the past, but still did not meet the standards of a free and fair election. It mainly focused on problems with voters' lists, but also mentioned ballot box-stuffing in Ajaria and some districts. It also raised concerns that pro-government party members dominated district and precinct electoral commissions and that Ajaria carried out its own electoral processes virtually independently and blocked most opposition party campaigning in the region.

Ajaria's announcement on November 6 of its large vote for Revival seemed to overwhelm and marginalize the partial vote counts being announced for the opposition parties, galvanizing their resistance to Shevardnadze. Voter turnout in Ajaria was reportedly 98%, of whom 95% endorsed the Revival Party. These results meant that Revival would be a major force in the legislature, which was unacceptable to those who felt that Ajaria's vote tally was a sham. The Dutch ambassador to the OSCE reportedly stated later that the "gross manipulation" of the vote in Ajaria was the worst of the irregularities in the election (*AP*, Nov. 26). Opposition leaders broke off negotiations with Shevardnadze on November 9, after he refused their demand to hold a new election. To display supposed mass support for the election results, the next day he traveled to Ajaria to address an assembled crowd of ostensible supporters, and Abashidze sent hundreds of police and other supporters to Tbilisi to march in support of the election.

Final electoral results were announced on November 20. The FNG bloc won the highest percentage of the party list vote, 21.3%, and Revival the second highest, 18.8%, prospectively giving the pro-Shevardnadze forces the largest share of seats. The National Movement received 18.8% of the party list vote, the Labor Party 12%, the United Democrats 8.8% and the New Right 7.8% of the vote. In single constituencies, FNG-affiliated or independent (but probably pro-presidential) candidates won the largest number of seats. Unlike the other opposition parties, New Right did not challenge the electoral returns and did not join opposition street protests.

The crisis deepened in Georgia following the announcement of final vote counts, with major demonstrations in the capital by pro-presidential Ajarian police and opposition supporters prominently led by Saakishvili, who demanded Shevardnadze's resignation and new elections. Protestors were galvanized by polls before and during the election (conducted with the guidance of U.S. and British NGOs) that indicated that the National Movement and the United Democrats could each expect over 20% of the vote. Georgians also were motivated by extensive coverage of the election by the independent Rustavi-2 television station. Saakashvili eschewed violence, urging his followers to emulate the peaceful protesters who helped oust former Yugoslav dictator Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. Georgian activists over the past few months had closely conferred with democracy advocates in Serbia on campaign and demonstration tactics (*Washington Post*, Nov. 25).

Although many in Georgia at first viewed Shevardnadze's role in the suspect vote count as uncertain, they saw his bid for support from Abashidze and defense of the results as indicating that he at least condoned, if not orchestrated, the suspect tally (*FBIS*, Nov. 22, Doc. No. CEP-16). Shevardnadze hurriedly convened the rump legislature on November 22 (National Movement and the United Democrats boycotted the session), but he was chased from the podium when demonstrators broke into the chamber. Burjanadze announced that she was assuming the presidency pending elections. Shevardnadze declared emergency rule, but cautioned his security forces not to use force. In an ultimatum delivered to the protestors the next day, Shevardnadze insisted that the new legislature had convened, replacing the old, and was now the supreme representative body. However, he seemingly offered to discuss moving up the date for new legislative and presidential elections.

Shevardnadze's Ouster. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov mediated between opposition leaders and Shevardnadze on the evening of November 23 in the face of Saakashvili's threat to storm the president's residence. Reportedly with U.S. concurrence, Ivanov stressed to Shevardnadze that he should not risk civil war by resorting to force against the opposition, but should negotiate a settlement, presumably to include new legislative elections (*Washington Post*, Nov. 25; see below for an alternative explanation). Also critical to Shevardnadze's decision to resign were reports that top defense, security, and internal (police) officials — whom Shevardnadze stated he would rely on to suppress the protests — told him that they would not accept such orders. Faced with this lack of support, Shevardnadze and the opposition leaders reached agreement on his resignation. Saakashvili hailed this coup a "rose revolution" to signify that it had not been violent.

In a speech to the country on November 24, acting president Burjanadze called for order to be re-established and for presidential elections within a constitutionally-mandated 45 days. She directed that the prorogued 1999 legislature would resume its work until new legislative elections could be held. She quickly met with security officials, and Tedo Japaridze (who broke with Shevardnadze during the crisis) was confirmed as secretary of the presidential Security Council (composed of the heads of the security ministries). He later was named foreign minister. She also declared that Georgia would continue its existing foreign policy aimed at integration with Europe and NATO. The Georgian Constitutional Court the next day lent some legitimacy to the coup and plans for new elections by ruling that the November 2 election was a fraud.

On November 26, the three opposition leaders announced their plans for sharing power, with Burjanadze stating that her party would back Saakashvili for president. She appointed Zhvania the minister of state (the top executive branch office under the president), but recommended that the constitution be changed to give the office more power. Saakashvili, in turn, stated that the opposition hoped to sweep both the presidential and legislative elections, and that Burjanadze would top the party list, perhaps assuring that she would become the speaker of a new legislature. Perhaps to alleviate some concerns raised among many of Shevardnadze's supporters by a statement by Burjanadze that investigations were being opened into electoral irregularities and that the guilty would be punished, Saakashvili called for a unity government that would include all progressive Georgians of all parties, and pledged that no one in the old government would be prosecuted. He called for the police to maintain order and for the military to suppress possible dissident elements in its ranks.

The Central Electoral Commission announced on December 2 that fifteen people had applied to gather signatures for the January presidential election. OSCE foreign ministers met in early December and pledged up to \$6 million to help administer presidential and legislative elections (OSCE, *Press Release*, Dec. 2).

Implications for Georgia

According to most observers, the legislative race marked an extraordinarily determined struggle for power as a prelude to the presidential election in 2005. Enscorced and corrupt officials were determined to gain dominant legislative influence in order to maintain their power and to control the prospective presidential race, and the opposition parties were determined to block these efforts, in this view (*FBIS*, Nov. 25, Doc. No. CEP-274; *Transitions Online*, Nov. 3). It was anticipated that the new pro-presidential legislature would elect a kindred politician as speaker, a crucial post in the run-up to the 2005 presidential race. The speaker becomes the interim head of state in case the president resigns or dies. According to this speculation, Abashidze, with tacit Russian military backing, aimed to assume the speakership and perhaps later the presidency.

All the political players in the crisis seemed intent on avoiding a repeat of the bloody 1992 coup that toppled independent Georgia's first president. The three principal opposition leaders agreed on power-sharing and quickly moved to reaffirm or appoint able individuals to the critical finance, foreign, and defense ministries. Nonetheless, some observers warn that there is no pre-eminent political figure behind which the country can rally, so factional disputes could eventually lead to violence. Some observers argue that Saakashvili's personal volatility may not make him a president able to unify and bring stability to Georgia (Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, *Policy Briefings*, Nov. 19; *The Daily Telegraph*, Nov. 24). Some observers warn that independent Georgia has witnessed frequent violence and uprisings by military and paramilitary groups. Saakashvili, concerned about rumors that reactionary groups might be mobilizing, on November 28 urged the avoidance of bloodshed but also threatened that "we will deal with [armed attacks] mercilessly" (*FBIS*, Nov. 28, Doc. No. CEP-282).

If the prospective government receives a solid mandate as expected at the polls, it may receive the legitimacy and time it needs to implement changes that might otherwise tax an impatient populace. The prospective government faces widespread poverty, official corruption, and separatism in its Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. Among the immediate domestic problems it must address are a budget deficit and rising crime. The new government also will need to carry out confidence-building with Ajaria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Abashidze has asserted that Ajaria will not accept orders from the interim government. At the same time, however, he has firmly stated that Ajaria will not formally secede. South Ossetia has re-emphasized that it wants to join Russia.

The prospective government must also reassure its neighbors. Azerbaijan's President Ilkham Aliyev, who had just won a controversial election himself, supported Shevardnadze during the crisis and has appeared cool toward the interim leadership. Japaridze met with Aliyev in late November to pledge that existing cooperation would continue. Armenia, which depends on energy from Russia that transits Georgia, called for peaceful elections and economic reforms that would bolster regional trade. Russia's Ivanov made clear that Russia was not happy that the coup had occurred, but accepted it

and would pursue close strategic ties with Georgia. He also stated that Russia was concerned that “outside pressure” had contributed to the coup (*ITAR-TASS*, Nov 25; Nov. 26). According to some observers, Putin was critical of the coup because it appeared to negate the added influence that Russia would have gained through Abashidze’s increased power. But he also accused Shevardnadze of bringing on his own downfall by failing to maintain “traditional” close ties to Russia or to protect, he seemed to imply, the legacy of Soviet-style economic and political rule (*FBIS*, Nov. 24, Doc. No. CEP-252; Nov. 25, Doc. No. CEP-141). Ivanov met with several CIS foreign ministers on November 25, and they seemed to accept the change of government in Georgia, but pointedly called for noninterference by “outside powers” (seemingly referring to U.S. interests) in Georgia’s domestic affairs (*ITAR-TASS*, Nov. 25).

Implications for U.S. Interests

According to the State Department, “Georgia plays a key role in furthering U.S. interests” in the Caspian region. Georgia cooperates in the war on terrorism and is a “key conduit” for Caspian oil and gas pipelines to Western markets, thereby increasing the diversity of world energy suppliers. The United States seeks to strengthen civil society and the rule of law in Georgia, and provides military assistance to combat terrorism, secure borders, and enhance participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace and interoperability with U.S. and coalition forces (*Congressional Budget Justification for FY2004*). Congress has earmarked or allocated \$1.1 billion in aid to Georgia (among the highest for Eurasia in per capita terms) over the period 1992-2002 to buttress these goals. The State Department on November 21 indicated that the Administration had spent \$2.4 million to support a democratic election on November 2. Most of the Georgian parties running in the November election endorsed cooperation with the United States on these goals, and the leaders of the acting government have reaffirmed these goals.

The Administration’s assessment of the November election became more negative after the final results were announced. The U.S. State Department issued statements on November 20-21, 2003, expressing deep disappointment that “massive vote fraud” had taken place, and in the face of rising protests in Georgia, called for all sides to abjure violence. Secretary of State Colin Powell on November 22 encouraged Shevardnadze to peacefully resolve the crisis, but did not urge him to resign or hold new elections, according to the State Department. After Shevardnadze resigned, Powell called to thank him for peacefully resolving the crisis and the State Department issued a statement praising Shevardnadze as a “towering figure in Georgia’s history and a close friend of the United States,” and as contributing to freeing millions from Soviet communism.

The United States quickly recognized Burjanadze as interim president, with Secretary Powell reportedly telephoning her on November 23 to offer U.S. support and to urge that new elections be free and fair. Burjanadze reported that she talked with President Bush on November 26 and that he offered electoral aid and that the United States “will guarantee Georgia’s safety if the country is threatened.” He also asked for and received assurances about Shevardnadze’s personal safety (*FBIS*, Nov. 26, Doc. No. CEP-309). The European Union on November 24 also expressed support for the interim government and called for democratic elections.

U.S. strategic interests in stability in Georgia seemed underlined by State Department spokesman Richard Boucher on November 25, when he announced that several U.S.

agencies would send advisors to the interim government to discuss aid for the upcoming elections and help in democratization. The next day, the White House announced that President Bush in his phone call to Burjanadze pledged continued U.S. support for Georgia's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and democratic and economic reforms. On November 28, Burjanadze met with the head of the Azerbaijan International Oil Consortium (a group of U.S. and other international energy firms that are developing Caspian offshore oilfields) and reassured him that the interim government backed the completion of the pipeline. Georgia's interim government also has indicated that its peacekeepers will remain on duty with NATO in Kosovo and with the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. The backgrounds of several of the new officials, including Saakashvili, who was educated in the United States, and Japaridze, the former ambassador to the United States, also appeared reassuring to many U.S. observers.

Many oppositionists in Georgia hailed the U.S. censure of the November election as a major contribution to Shevardnadze's decision to resign. Others criticized the United States for not sending a top emissary to Georgia and instead depending on Russia to defuse the crisis. Some also were critical of what they viewed as long-term U.S. efforts to prop up Shevardnadze's rule. Some pro-Shevardnadze supporters were highly critical of what they viewed as U.S. indifference to — if not active support for — Shevardnadze's ouster. Shevardnadze lent credence to this view on November 26 when he ruefully questioned the U.S. role, stating that "I was one of the biggest supporters of U.S. policy" (The Daily Telegraph, Nov. 27; *FBIS*, Nov. 25, Doc. No. CEP-227; and Nov. 24, Doc. No. CEP-358). Some observers supposed that different U.S. groups may have operated at cross-purposes, with some supporting the Shevardnadze government and others the opposition parties (*FBIS*, Nov. 24, Doc. No. CEP-142). Russian Federation Council head Mikhail Margelov on November 22 seemed to suggest that the United States had criticized the election results without fathoming that this could encourage Shevardnadze's overthrow (*Interfax*, Nov. 22; *FBIS*, Nov 22, Doc. No. CEP-148).

Commentators varied widely on whether Shevardnadze's resignation would bolster U.S. or Russian influence in Georgia. Some viewed Shevardnadze's putative "tilt" toward Russia as a feint to spur the United States to rush to his aid. One advocate of this view stated that the coup amounted to the replacement of one pro-U.S. government by another that would be even more pro-American (*FBIS*, Nov. 25, Doc. No. CEP-259). Such a government could press harder for more U.S. aid and for integration into Western institutions, including admission into NATO (Alexander Rahr, *FBIS*, Nov. 24, Doc. No. CEP-287). Others argued that Shevardnadze's alliance with Abashidze threatened a strategic tilt toward Russia (Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Caucasus Election Watch*, Nov. 18). Supporting this view, a German analyst concluded that Russia was playing an increasing role in Georgia that the West would have to accommodate (*Hamburg Financial Times*, Nov. 25). A third view is expressed by those who suggest that both U.S. and Russian interests in Georgia could suffer if it becomes a harbor for terrorism or otherwise becomes more unstable, so that U.S.-Russian cooperation there is essential (Dmitriy Trenin, *FBIS*, Nov. 24, Doc. No. CEP-287). On November 27, Saakashvili appeared to endorse this perspective, arguing that Georgia should seek security and economic assistance from both Russia and the United States. Zhvania too has argued for economic ties with both the United States and Russia.