

Kremlin's Shadow Hangs Over Absurd Protests

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Georgia's reforms have come under threat many times. The first and most serious threat came from wealthy Georgian businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili. A Georgian version of Russia's self-exiled tycoon Boris Berezovsky, Patarkatsishvili hoped the Tbilisi government would do his bidding in return for money. The government refused and, for Patarkatsishvili, that meant it was his enemy.

In November 2007, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered government forces to violently break up an opposition rally in which Patarkatsishvili played a major if shadowy role. At the same time Saakashvili called for an early presidential election on Jan. 5, 2008. Soon afterward, Patarkatsishvili, who was running for president, invited Deputy Interior Minister Irakli Kodua to visit him in his London home. Patarkatsishvili proposed that Kodua arrange a news conference on election day and hold up a stack of empty ballots and declare: "The authorities ordered me to stuff the ballot box with these, but I cannot go against the will of the people." The idea backfired. Kodua recorded the planned speech and released a video. Badri garnered only 7 percent of the vote and died shortly thereafter from a heart attack.

The next attempt to unseat Saakashvili was the 2008 Russia–Georgia war. It almost succeeded when it turned out that the Georgian army was nowhere near as good as Israel’s and that, contrary to Saakashvili’s hopes, Europe was unwilling to come to his aid for fear of crossing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. But the poor condition of Russia’s army did not allow it to string up Saakashvili “by the balls” — as Putin once quipped on television he would do.

The opposition once again took to the streets in April 2009. Protesters stormed a prison, blocked the road to the airport and prevented Saakashvili from going to a restaurant. In short, they wanted to earn a good thrashing from the police. But this time they did not succeed.

A month later, the Georgian Interior Ministry put down a military coup. Despite an attempt by the Georgian authorities to present the whole thing as a misguided lark, it was no laughing matter. The commander of one of the country’s four brigades joined the conspirators, and a second commander did nothing to rat them out.

In contrast to the earlier unrest, last weekend’s protests in Tbilisi really were a joke. Specially recruited people carrying specially made clubs attacked a police car. Then Russia’s Foreign Ministry announced that Saakashvili had violated “the law of freedom of assembly.”

Back in 2009, any link between protesters and the Kremlin was covert. Not anymore. Now, opposition leaders Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Noghaideli have appeared publicly in Moscow. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the Georgian opposition went to Moscow and then lost its credibility. It first lost its credibility and then went to Moscow.

As a matter of fact, Saakashvili is lucky that Putin is in charge on the other side of the Caucasus. That forces him to enact reforms for the same reason that Peter the Great made his reforms: If he doesn’t, Georgia will be wiped off the face of the Earth.

The real problem is that people with evil intentions are unpredictable. Eventually, something really terrible could happen. An opposition leader could be killed or a bomb could be detonated in the middle of a major opposition rally and the Kremlin would claim that Saakashvili’s government was the responsible.

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