

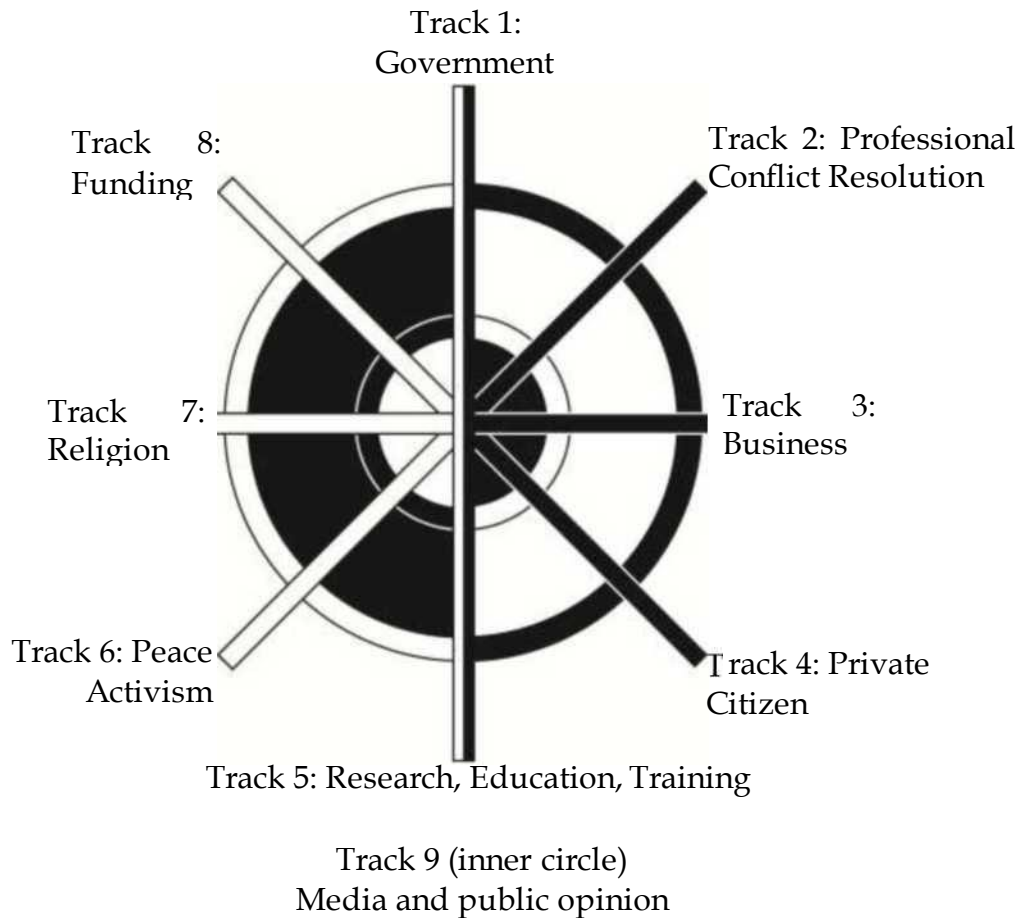
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The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy

Inside the Revolution of the Roses

Occasional Paper 15

March 2005



The mission of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy is to promote a systems approach to peacebuilding and to facilitate the transformation of deep-rooted social conflict

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The peaceful Rose Revolution which took place in Georgia on November 23, 2003, has started a new wave of political change in this former Soviet country. This nonviolent shift of power brought hope to the local population, as well as to the members of the international community. I am deeply touched by the overwhelming desire of ordinary people to choose nonviolent approaches to change.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Georgia has about two thousand years of history as an independent state. Throughout this history, it has been conquered by the Persians, Romans, Arabs, Byzantines, Turks, Mongols, Russians and finally the Soviet Empire. Georgia first became a Social Democratic Republic in 1918 and was occupied by Soviet forces in February 1921. It has existed as a multi-ethnic state with various Ibero-Caucasian tribes residing on its territory, such as the Kartvelian tribe that has dominated Eastern Georgia since the 4th Century B.C. and the Kolkh tribe, dominant in the Western part of Georgia since the 6th century B.C. Georgia has always been a collection of various principalities, such as Kartli, Kakheti, Racha-Lechkhumi, Abkhazeti, Samegrelo, Svaneti, Guria, Imereti, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Ajara, among others.

The Golden Period of the Georgian Kingdom was during the 12-13th centuries A.D., during the reign of David the 4th and Queen Tamara. During that period, the Georgian kingdom stretched from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, occupying virtually the whole Southern Caucasus area. Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia from the 5th century A.D. on, was always a diverse city where different cultures and religions co-existed peacefully. Historically, the Orthodox Christian nation was home to many Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians, and other religious groups. Georgia was known for its tolerance and hospitality towards other ethnic and religious groups. At the same time, it always had a semi-federal structure of government where principalities played an extremely important role in the formation of the Georgian state. Georgia, in fact, is comprised of Kartlians, Kakhetians, Mengrels, Svans, Abkhaz, Ajarians, Gurians, Imeretians, Tiush, Pshav, Mokheve, Kevsur, Rachvelians, Meskhs, Javakhs, Greeks, Jews, Ossetians, Armenians, Kurds, and Azrbaijanis, and more.

During Soviet rule the situation changed. Georgia, as one of the Republics of the Soviet Union, became more centralized; its resources and power were concentrated in Tbilisi, which was directly subservient to Moscow authorities. The resulting unequal distribution of resources and power generated increasing

dissatisfaction throughout Georgia. As a result, since the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Empire Georgia has faced a number of serious internal problems. Three civil wars in Georgia between 1990 and 1993 each claimed thousands of victims. Russian forces were sent into the conflict to protect Soviet interests. They naturally sided with each region's self-declared government in order to maintain influence on the Georgian state. They partially achieved their goal in 1993 when, after a Russian military offensive, Georgia was forced to sign the Commonwealth of Independent States treaty. That treaty placed the border between Georgia and the separatists at the Inguri River. Since the cease fire of 1994, Georgia has enjoyed a atmosphere of nonviolence, internally as well as with Russia.

President Shevardnadze left his position as a former Soviet leader and returned to Georgia in March 1992 with overwhelming Western support, promising to build a democratic nation-state. He started peace negotiations with breakaway regions, but did not succeed in building conditions for peaceful conflict resolution. There are many reasons for this:

- Neither the regions nor the Russian leadership trusted Shevardnadze.
- His style of leadership, although cosmetically changed, remained essentially based on the centralized Soviet government system.
- Structural problems had grown, and the social environment for creating conditions for positive peace was completely absent.
- Widespread and systemic corruption resulted in massive avoidance of social responsibilities, such as the draft.
- Misappropriation of funds, salaries below the poverty level (when paid at all), and public officials profiting from drugs and arms naturally contributed to the popular loss of faith in the government.

Georgia lacked favorable conditions for development and the creation of a truly democratic society. Georgian society enjoyed a relatively free press, but problems with corruption and mismanagement remained. Minimum wages were equal to roughly \$20 a month, pensions \$14 a month, and these were very rarely paid on time. While a few in the private sector prospered enormously, most of the population lived below the poverty level. The wealth and resources were concentrated in Tbilisi; government officials took huge kickbacks from various Georgian and foreign companies, whereas regional governments had very little. New capitalism proved to be good for only about one percent of Georgia's population! While people did not want to go back to the Soviet years, they longed for a democratic, capitalistic system that supported social justice and human rights for the whole population.

Despite, or perhaps because of this economic inequality, the non-governmental sector strengthened during the last six years of Shevardnadze's rule. NGOs made significant strides in educating the general public about their civil and human rights. Foreign NGOs, like the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Eurasia Foundation, CARE, and Mercy Corps, together with the local Liberty Institute, the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation, and the

Young Jurists Association, managed to change the political climate. People's consciousness of their rights and duties as citizens of a democratic country grew. The time for a peaceful revolution in 2003 was ripe, but there were many challenges ahead.

THE SEEDS OF REVOLUTION

As the election period approached in November 2003, Shevardnadze's party, the "Citizens' Union of Georgia," was divided into many factions. Most prominent amongst those factions was the National Movement for a Democratic Change, led by a young US-educated jurist, Michael Saakashvili. Mr. Saakashvili had served as the head of a judicial committee in the Parliament of Georgia, as Minister of Justice, and finally as the head of Tbilisi's City Council – the elected local government body of the Georgian capital. His outstanding advocacy and interpersonal skills earned him great popularity. At the very young age of 36, he was considered a clear favorite to win the next presidential election. His party gained support in nearly all parts of the country. His partners included the party of United Democrats, led by former Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Mr. Zurab Jhvania and the current Speaker, Mrs. Nino Burjanadze. Burjanadze's image as a young, charismatic and moderate female leader attracted a significant percentage of the voters. Although the United Democrats' support was not as high as that of Saakashvili's party, they managed to engage an emerging, small middle class in the voting process. High-class nomenklatura-feudals, used to the privileges of exploiting small, local communities, were still in Shevardnadze's camp, but their numbers were small.

When the parliamentary election took place on November 2, 2003, people were convinced that the National Movement and its allies would gather the most votes. The first results of the exit polls showed that this party was leading in practically all regions of Georgia. The government resorted to fraud, however, and the results published on November 7 by the Election Commission were false. They gave first place to Shevardnadze's party and second place to Ajara's autocratic leader of the Asian Abashidze's Revival party – both had been polling in the single digits in opinion polls and exit polls alike. This final blow to the disenfranchised citizenry of Georgia convinced them of the necessity of dramatic civil disobedience.

Thirty to forty thousand people amassed at Liberty Square every day to protest the vote-stealing by the corrupt government. Protests escalated and the government brought ten thousand armed police and soldiers to defend its headquarters on Ingorokva Street, close to Liberty Square. The confrontation intensified after talks between the representatives of the different factions failed. Demonstrators demanded that President Shevardnadze resign, allowing new parliamentary and presidential elections. He refused to do so, and the danger grew. The other political parties were not powerful enough to challenge the President. The troops were ready to defend the only "legitimate" (arguably, as there was no credible opponent

in the 2000 election of President Shevarnadze) elected body of the government if the crowd attacked its headquarters. The political leaders of the opposition therefore appealed to the demonstrators to establish a non-violent, yet revolutionary, Civic Disobedience Committee.

The Civic Disobedience Committee was created on November 10. It included film director Goga Khaindrava, writers David Turashvili, Lasha Bughadze, and Defi Gogibedashvili, US-educated lawyer Nicholas Rurua, Liberty Institute activists Giga Bokeria and David Zurabishvili, Young Jurists Association leader Tinatin Khidalsheli, and conflict resolution specialist Irakli Kakabadze. The books of Gene Sharp, John Burton, Richard Rubenstein, John W. McDonald, Dennis Sandole, Johan Galtung, together with works of Mohandas Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and Georgian activist Ilia Chavchavadze, a proponent of non-violent social change, were our guiding voices for the peaceful revolution.

For a successful, non-violent completion of the revolution, the demonstrating crowd needed to temporarily disperse. Here, creative thinking and decision making proved to be crucial. The crowd had to disperse to allow the government to save face and to avoid confronting the soldiers who were ready to fight. The organizers decided to encircle the government building for half an hour giving a clear signal to the government to resign, before starting their final action. They circled the building and peacefully handed a thousand roses to policemen and army personnel before returning to their homes. This changed the disposition of the armed forces towards peaceful demonstrators and won their favor.

For the next five days, the Civil Disobedience Committee visited a vast number of universities, organizations and regions; meanwhile opposition leaders continued working to convince the population that the resignation of the existing government was necessary for the good of the country. Mr. Saakashvili went to Western Georgia and managed to recruit around thirty thousand people from Samegrelo and Imereti. By November 21, many people had also joined from Eastern Georgia. On the morning of November 22, about one hundred and fifty thousand people assembled at Liberty Square. Opposition leaders and the Civic Disobedience Committee gave a final signal to the government to resign peacefully. It was clear that by using force, the government would lose moral and legal power. But the government refused once again. The leaders of the Civic Movement then made a direct appeal to the president:

"If you do not resign, we will not obey you. We won't kill you and we will face death if your order is imposed upon the people. You can have our dead bodies, but you will never have our obedience again."

Those words of the great Mahatma Gandhi proved powerful. Thousands of people took to the streets to support the non-violent change of power. Rock musicians played for the demonstrators in a musical protest that lasted all night, very much reminiscent of Woodstock. The process brought together everyone from scientists, doctors, and teachers, to farmers and students and all religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities – nearly eighty percent of Georgian society in total! Still, the government remained unyielding.

How long would it be possible to hold peaceful demonstrations without somebody provoking the crowd? It was very important to present a face-saving exit to the government, but at the same time to not give up. The people clearly wanted the president out, but they did not want to see blood. An overwhelming majority of people took to the streets, supporting a call for a non-violent change of power (interestingly, not necessarily in support of one or another political party). People spoke out against the corruption and structural dysfunction of the existing regime. The old guard politicians, however, were not ready to act creatively.

In these decisive moments, the young Saakashvili found enough resources within himself to conduct a very wise political campaign that would eventually lead to the nearly unprecedented "Rose Revolution." He borrowed the words of the first Georgian President, Zviad K. Gamsakhurdia, "We shall throw roses instead of bullets at our enemies," and drew on the experience of the Flower Children during the civil rights campaign in the US, as his guiding principles for action.

The first Georgian president failed in his attempt to use roses as a non-violent weapon for progress and change – he did not have a well-trained, mobilized political team or the skills for waging a non-violent campaign for change. Also, many people thought this approach was too idealistic. President Saakashvili, however, proved that peaceful change was possible in Georgia! This was the lesson for Georgians and all liberation movements around the world: the ideals of Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama could actually be implemented and could sometimes be more realistic than "Real-politik" itself! Independent media, especially the independent news channel Rustavi 2, played a major role in the success of the "Rose Revolution." Media coverage contributed to the relatively high degree of transparency during the revolutionary events.

The media's involvement in the conflicted situations was constructive, and their coverage of hot points helped to prevent an outbreak of violence in many cases. The information and views put forth by independent channels were on the side of prevention most of the time, rather than simply providing routine coverage of heated confrontations or violent events.

The oppressors feared the negative public image so much that they abandoned structural violence and did not resort to direct violence, in an attempt to uphold any remaining public image as peaceful people. No one wanted to be seen as the one who provoked a civil war. Also, the media strongly articulated nonviolence messages.

Rustavi 2 showed a documentary about Mahatma Gandhi only 6 days prior to the revolution and aired a special program on Satyagraha – non violence, the force that is generated through adherence to Truth, or a way of life based on love and compassion—that I participated in. Throughout the days leading up to the revolution, Gandhi's word, Satyagraha, was used increasingly by revolutionaries who felt that being firm in truth and nonviolence did not represent a retreat or sellout of social justice.

All during this time, the government did not find a useful tool against Gandhi's philosophy. The rules of Satyagraha were translated into Georgian, published in

Peace Times magazine and distributed to the demonstrators and activists. Media played a large role in proliferating Gandhi's message. Radio shows and newspaper articles about nonviolence also helped during the revolution. Several newspapers like 24 Hours and Resonansi published papers educating the public about conflict resolution and the thinking of Gandhi, Johan Galtung, Professor Richard Rubenstein, and other peace builders.

The events of November 22 were crucial for the Revolution. Political and civil opposition leaders assembled in City Hall to finalize their plans. As President Shevardnadze tried to convene a session of his illegally elected parliament, the people stormed both the government and parliament buildings, giving the police hugs and roses on their way in! The demonstrators had established a good relationship with the armed forces by giving them food, supplies, and roses throughout the demonstrations; many of the soldiers laid down their arms, welcoming the spirit of change.

Moments later, Saakashvili delivered a final rose to President Shevardnadze who then was rushed out of the Parliament through a back door. He did not resign immediately. The next day the Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, came to Tbilisi and facilitated a dialogue that led to President Shevardnadze's resignation later that day and a peaceful transition of power.

On January 4, 2004, Mr. Saakashvili was elected President of Georgia by an overwhelming majority of the population.

Mtoecongoiningwoa) of the Rose Revolution is to bring a positive peace to Georgian society. This means to challenge the structural violence of corruption and nomenklatura and to advance social justice. Without endangering the private sector, Georgia must increase the role of the public sector to provide more social security for the impoverished populace. This is not going to be easy, but if it is done with skill and courage, it could be successful. It is Georgia's major challenge for the next five years.

One thing remains unquestioned: the revolution happened without bloodshed. This is the main lesson from the Rose Revolution of November, 2003. The path of our new president is challenging. He is fighting enormous odds. His charisma, energy, and newly-discovered diplomatic talent offer Georgians hope that in this small Caucasian country of five million people everyone can aspire to the basic human rights espoused in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations.

Yet, as part of a free society, Georgians have disagreed with our new president's constitutional model. The division of branches mirrors the Russian format, giving the President little more power than Parliament, but significantly, also giving him the power to dismantle Parliament. Many analysts think this gives too much authority to the President. We prefer the American system with three independent branches of government and its system of checks and balances.

But, to build a democratic nation, we need to be able to "agree to disagree" and give a chance to the new president to fight two of the great evils of humanity – corruption and greed. To create an open society with strong civic institutions, we need to overcome the syndrome of nomenklatura feudalism and crony capitalism. Our newly-elected president is moving in this direction. He's allowing Parliament to criticize him, maintaining quotas for women and minorities in government, redistributing property that was illegally acquired by the former regime, and he already has quite a sizeable opposition even though his approval rating is still in the 80s.

If he changes his current course, he will definitely receive very strong condemnation from civil society.

Post-Soviet Georgia was one of the semi-feudal states during this transitional period, where the power rested in Tbilisi. All the resources were administered through this highly centralized and corrupt mechanism. People in the regions like Samegrelo, Imereti, Abkhazia, Shida Kartli, Ajara, Svaneti, South Ossetia and others were highly dissatisfied with the absence of socio-economic empowerment, real decentralization and the federal system of government. That dissatisfaction led to a number of conflicts between the center and the regions. Government was doing very little to develop the economy in the regions. This neglect served to destabilize a very fragile situation. Also, police were ineffective in preventing various corrupt clans from profiting off the drug trade, trafficking of women, arms dealing, smuggling and other social ills. These underlying causes of the unrest

leading to the non-violent revolution were almost completely ignored by the previous government. Basic human needs, basic human rights and social justice were ignored. We can not say that the press was not independent from government, but it was certainly in the hands of interest groups that did not deserve public admiration.

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

There are about 30 independent private national or cable TV channels in Georgia. This is a large number for a country with a population of 4.5 million. Two stations have been closed. They were owned by two Georgian oligarchs, Badri Patarkatsishvili and Vano Chkhartsishvili, who are known as crony capitalists and generally disliked by most Georgians. Their channels were largely promoting the two allegedly criminal businessmen and their ultra right wing ideas. The closure of these stations did not create much of a problem for democracy, but there are many other problems.

The owners of several TV channels are suspected of criminal wrongdoings. Mr. Patarkatsishvili, for example, is accused by Russian authorities of stealing several million dollars from their support budget, and he is also a suspect in the killing of a TV reporter. Mr. Chkhartishvili is suspected of being one of the architects of a scam to steal deposits from ordinary people after the breakup of the Soviet Union, transferring the funds to his private bank, the United Georgian Bank. His bank holds about \$500 million, much of which is thought to be ordinary citizens' deposits.

At least they could be called crony capitalists. Punishing "Citizen Kane," (the famous hero of the great film by Orson Welles) does not mean fighting a free press and silencing journalists. The Rose Revolution is not for "Rose buds" that manipulate the public opinion for their corporate interests. Public television and radio are desperately needed now in Georgia and our president has started to act on this. He supports a Georgian version of PBS and NPR, a free press independent of special interests. US Senator McCain is a good friend of our president and hopefully sound lessons will be learned from this great American statesman.

As far as freedom of the press is concerned today, I disagree that there has been an assault on a free press since the revolution.

FOREIGN POLICY

The foreign policy of the new administration is just taking shape. Signs are that it is trying to develop a peaceful triangle between Georgia, Russia, and the United States. Without having a balanced and good relationship with both Russia and the United States, Georgia cannot solve its own internal territorial problems.

The first steps of the new administration indicate that there is good will to stabilize this triangle and peacefully solve the problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian president has made some encouraging statements, and the new Georgian president has every incentive to peacefully resolve those conflicts. Indeed, it is a

very difficult task. Much skill is needed to implement peace and much effort will be necessary.

President Saakashvili has also made positive statements against the clan system and nepotism which had spread widely in the former Soviet countries. It will be extremely difficult to eliminate these social diseases, but he has already shown his political will by combating corrupt state officials. Many elements of the former clan system have been removed from government management. The new government is composed mainly of young professionals. Although it is too early to talk about success, the EU has already given Georgia about \$1 billion for the next 5 years, in acknowledgment of the lowered levels of corruption and improved tax collection. The USAID Millennium Challenge program has allocated about \$1 billion over the next several years. Corruption continues, but on a significantly lower level. As Georgia faces new challenges every day, people are hopeful and enthusiastic that the progress will continue. In his economic program, designed by a Harvard-educated Georgian economist, President Saakashvili's party is giving more freedom to true entrepreneurship, creating good conditions for ecologically clean and intellectual businesses, a cornerstone of 21st century economy. This program also gives tax breaks to low income land owners and promotes the tourism and energy sectors in Georgia. These are encouraging signs, although there is much work to be done to fulfill these promises.

Georgia's future will be bright if we stick to the main principle of the Rose Revolution: non-violent social change oriented towards development and creation of conditions for positive peace. Our new president has this vision. Now he needs people who can implement it.

LESSONS FOR THE WORLD

We are living in the age of globalization, which has its own positive and negative aspects. Economic development could be considered a positive, while neo-colonialism and imperialism cause concern. Many small countries are trying to break the cycle of the "National and Social Darwinism" of the corporate and feudal age, as well as to assist the three billion individuals who live below the poverty level.

Structural and cultural violence remain some of the most painful ills of the contemporary world. At the same time, we know for sure that traditional leftist revolutions have failed to address the basic human needs of the disenfranchised parts of the world citizenry. The world is looking for a new wave of liberation from militarism and economic slavery.

The progressive movement is fragmented between anarchists, remnants of past socialist-communist movements, and new isolationist anti-globalism groups. There is no uniting force. Although the world is ready for a new revolution, it does not have clear leadership offering a better alternative than the existing corporate machinery.

Georgia is in an awkward position within this context. It is one of the small countries suffering from imperialistic globalization yet it could gain from

educational and decentralized globalization. Georgia is a part of the third world economically, but needs to have more social consciousness to develop stability. Although it is considered a part of the new Europe, it is indeed a very old place with very old problems, including economic exploitation by big countries and corporations.

In today's smaller world, non-violent action, coupled with global education through the internet and other media, should have a profound effect on progress for the 21st century. If we would like to make progress inevitable, the new doctrine of social responsibility coupled with individual freedom must prevail. This is not an easy task. Providing an opportunity for small countries and poor citizens of the world is the major challenge of our time. While it is extremely difficult, the Rose Revolution proved it is not impossible.

About the author

*Irakli Z. Kakabadze, one of the leading social scientists in Georgia, is Editor in Chief of **Peace Times** Magazine and South Caucasus Office coordinator for the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy. He was one of the leading members of the Civil Disobedience Committee during the "Rose Revolution" and is based in Washington and Tbilisi.*