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GEORGIA: INDEPENDENCE DRIVE ACCELERATING

Summary

Last April's brutal dispersal of Georgia demonstrators by Soviet military and security forces prompted Georgian nationalist leaders to step up the pursuit of the republic's independence, lost in 1921. Differences, though, exist between those who favor a tough approach to Moscow and demand independence quickly, and others who favor a more moderate, gradualist approach. While the Lithuanian events will underscore each group's determination that its approach is correct, independence pressures at the moment seem to be bolstering a more radical approach. Meanwhile, a number of republic minorities, feeling oppressed by the Georgians, oppose Georgian independence, and considerable violence is likely to erupt periodically. Moscow will attempt to avoid military intervention in the republic's civil conflicts, but will likely take an increasingly tough line in response to republic steps toward independence.

This memorandum was prepared by [] the Office of Soviet Analysis with a contribution by []. Comments and questions are welcome and may be directed to [].

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~~CONFIDENTIAL~~Growth of Nationalism

For Georgians, the killing of 20 Georgian demonstrators in Tbilisi by Soviet troops on 9 April 1989 was a turning point in the recent history of their nation and the spark for a meteoric growth of modern Georgian nationalism and the drive for independence.

Georgian political opinion became more radical throughout 1989, but Western travelers and Soviet domestic press reports both indicate that since about January of this year, a qualitative shift toward greater anti-Soviet feeling among Georgians has occurred. Demonstrators have destroyed and defaced statues of Lenin and vandalized other symbols of Soviet power such as hammer and sickle reliefs on buildings and monuments marking Soviet-Georgian friendship. Demonstrations of varying size take place in Tbilisi each Friday evening at 6:00 with leaders from various nationalist groups advocating everything from secession to stronger environmental laws. During the 9 April anniversary about 10,000 demonstrators marched on a military headquarters outside of Tbilisi, hurling anti-Soviet and anti-military slogans and burning a Soviet military commander in effigy.

The nationalists have had a significant impact on the cultural and educational policies in the republic. Georgian nationalist and orthodox church flags now fly from nearly all the buildings in the republic's capital. A new language law makes Georgian the republic's primary language; and whereas previously Georgians and minority groups in the republic used Russian as the lingua franca, all schools now are moving toward using Georgian as the language of instruction. Press reports indicate that all republic schools are also now teaching Georgian history, and some are seeking to replace the history of the CPSU with Georgian courses. There have also been proposals to replace Communist ideology classes with Georgian Orthodox religious instruction. Many schools are currently offering religious training, but it is not yet mandatory.

The Georgian orthodox religion is an important source of inspiration for Georgian nationalism; during the April demonstrations last year the Georgian patriarch was one of the speakers. Since then, religion has grown in significance. Young people are very involved in the church and reporting indicates that even Communist Party officials attend services. Georgians appear to be returning to the church for two reasons--it is now possible to openly participate in religious activities without fear of repercussions, and it is a uniquely powerful way for Georgians to express their ethnic identity.

Independence Drive

Over the past year the Georgian Supreme Soviet has passed several resolutions which put Georgia in the forefront of the fight for sovereignty by a number of union republics. In March the republic Supreme Soviet declared the Soviet annexation of the republic in 1921 illegal and asked Moscow to begin negotiations with them on independence. Other recently passed resolutions illustrate the determined nature of Georgia's independence drive.

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Sovereignty Law. At the time of its passage, the Georgian sovereignty law went beyond those of any of the other republics which had passed such laws--the three Baltic republics and Azerbaijan. Not only does it state that the power of republic laws supersedes the power of USSR laws, it also states that a Supreme Soviet action to declare a republic law unconstitutional will result in an immediate declaration of independence by Georgia.

Economic Autonomy. The Georgian Supreme Soviet has passed an economic autonomy law which gives the republic the sole right to determine which goods are exported from Georgia. This would allow the republic to take care of its own people first and then send excess food products and consumer goods to other places in the Soviet Union, or, if republic officials choose, to export those goods outside the country.

Secession Referendum. The Georgian Supreme Soviet was one of the first to pass a resolution providing in principle for a non-binding public referendum on the question of secession. No date has been set, however, for such a referendum.

Abolition of Article VI. Most recently the republic Supreme Soviet, under pressure from nationalist groups, has abolished Article VI of the Georgian republic constitution which, like the same article in the USSR constitution, ensured the supremacy of the Communist Party, and postponed republic Supreme Soviet elections until October or November in order to give the republic's nascent parties time to organize for a multi-party election.

Several other measures before the republic Supreme Soviet, if passed, would put still more distance between Georgia and Moscow--for example, the formation of a republic Ministry of Defense and strengthened trade ties to the West. The Georgian Communist Party, moreover, is likely to vote to break away from Moscow at its congress beginning 15 May.

In addition, several Georgian institutions have already voted to secede from All-Union groups. For example, the Georgian Union of Writers is no longer a member of the USSR Writer's Union. Even the republic soccer team has decided it will compete internationally as a Georgian team rather than as a part of the Soviet Union's soccer association, though the international soccer association has rejected Georgia's proposal for this. Most recently, party and Komsomol cells in local universities have disbanded.

Nationalist Groups

Georgian nationalist groups have become increasingly influential since last April, despite infighting and differing opinions on the speed with which Georgia should seek independence and what type of government should succeed the present one. The death last fall of the father of the Georgian Nationalist Independence Movement, Merab Kostava, has left a leadership void, however; Kostava was able to navigate somewhat successfully the minefield of nationalist political opinion and even brought differing groups together in an umbrella organization. Today, however, one needs a score card to keep track of the over 120 groups that compete for public support. Three groups predominate. Two, the Georgian Popular Front and the Rustaveli Society, are moderate, willing to work within the existing system. The third, the National Democratic Party, is radical in outlook, calls for immediate independence, and advocates extreme tactics.

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At present, the Georgian Popular Front is the most well-organized non-official group to run candidates for this fall's Supreme Soviet elections. Its leaders, many of whom are middle aged Communist Party members, advocate working within the system for more autonomy, while seeking independence within the next five years. The group advocates strong ties to the United States in order to help the republic's economy. Its leaders claim that it is the most powerful informal group in the republic, and its seemingly close relationship with the republic Supreme Soviet supports this view. We are not certain how great its popular support is, but the group's leaders claim over 100,000 members.

The Rustaveli Society is similar to the Front but considers itself a political group rather than a party. It seeks independence within the next two to three years. Rustaveli leaders claim their group is the largest in the republic with over 350,000 members. Most of its members are Georgians, but the group is trying to encourage other ethnic groups to join. Rustaveli's leadership and much of its membership are made up of literary and cultural figures.

The National Democratic Party has refused to work within the existing Soviet system, advocates immediate secession from the Soviet Union, and successfully pressed to postpone elections originally scheduled for the end of March. This group recently participated in a republic conference of radical groups which declared the republic government illegal, advocated the election of a shadow government, and branded as traitors all candidates in the elections scheduled for March. The group's tactics include hunger strikes and threats against republic and Soviet leaders. Its leaders are prominent and vocal.

The NDP is currently spearheading a drive to collect signatures of those who are willing to give up their Soviet citizenship. NDP leaders state that they currently have over 30,000 signatures, and claim that if half of the republic population of 5.2 million were to sign, Georgia would automatically be independent. Again, we cannot gauge the amount of popular support that the NDP and other radical groups enjoy (their claim of 30,000 signatures, for instance, may not be accurate), but their main support seems to be among the youth and at the recent 9 April demonstrations in Tbilisi radical nationalists appeared to have the spotlight.

Factors Complicating the Path to Independence

Georgia's mishandling of its own restive sub-republic minorities has sparked interethnic violence in the republic and may prove to be an important stumbling block to a smoother transition to independence. While Georgian culture is being increasingly emphasized, the culture of Georgia's many minority ethnic groups is being suppressed, prompting concern among the republic's minorities that they are being systematically "georgianized." Republic officials, showing no patience with minorities' demands, have steadfastly refused all requests for increased levels of autonomy and have been unresponsive to minority concerns on linguistic and other cultural issues.

The two groups whose response to Georgian chauvinism has been strongest are the Abkhaz and the Ossetians; clashes between these groups and Georgians resulted in deaths on both sides. Abkhazians wish to see their autonomous republic raised to the status of union republic, or at the very least be separated from Georgia and joined to the Russian Republic. Georgians, however, declare that Abkhazia belongs to the Georgians, not the Abkhaz (who constitute only 17 percent of the region's population), and refuse to even

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consider its separation. Bloody clashes broke out between the two sides in April 1989 and again in July. The Ossetians have demanded that the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast be united with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic, where two-thirds of Ossetians live and which is a part of the Russian Republic. Violence erupted there in November 1989 and several times since; Georgians and Ossetians are currently being kept apart by MVD troops. Recently, a Georgian nationalist leader declared to a US audience that if the Ossetians persist in their calls for secession, there will be more bloodshed. [redacted]

Georgia's other minority nationalities have also been active, though not as violent. Azeris, who form majorities in three districts of southeastern Georgia, staged violent demonstrations last summer calling for more autonomy. Russians, concerned by the falling status of the Russian language and an increase in anti-Russian sentiment, have formed an "interfront" in Georgia similar to those organized by the Russian minorities in Moldavia and the Baltic. Meskhetian Turks, deported from Georgia in 1944, have increased efforts to return after recent violence against them in Central Asia; Georgians have refused to accept them. There also have been scattered calls for separation from Georgia by Armenians and Adzhars. [redacted]

The Abkhaz, Azeris, and Adzhars are Muslim, and claim that Georgian chauvinism is aimed especially at them for religious reasons and that some Georgians are attempting to force Muslims to convert. Georgians, however, appear to be equally intent on "georgianizing" all their minorities, irrespective of religious affiliation, although there are some indications that Georgians fear a pan-Islamic coalition. At this time there is no indication that Georgia's Moslems are planning any such coalition. [redacted]

Even the most extreme Georgian nationalists have not yet advocated ousting minorities from the republic. Rather, [redacted] Georgians were taken aback by the extent to which non-Georgian minorities still cling to their ethnic identities. They also resent minority resistance to Georgian linguistic and cultural policies, and seem not to comprehend how intimidating these policies appear to non-Georgians. [redacted]

[redacted] Russians in Tbilisi indicates that many longtime non-Georgian residents of the city are leaving because they fear the undercurrent of violence and sense that local authorities may have lost control of the republic to warring nationalist groups. [redacted] non-Georgians often feel coerced into doing things because of the preponderance of Georgians (70% of the republic population) in most social situations. [redacted]

Moscow's Perspective

Moscow, probably correctly, fears that anti-Russian elements of Georgian nationalism will become more pronounced if Georgians are not allowed more independence, and therefore is not discouraging moderate nationalists. Accordingly, over the past year, Moscow has practiced a policy of restraint from involvement in interethnic disputes throughout the country. However, if Russians were to become the targets of violence or if radical nationalists were to attempt the violent overthrow of the republic government, Moscow would feel compelled to intervene, probably through airlifting non-Georgians out of the republic or economic sanctions. Moscow would still be reluctant to

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use force or military coercion, however: such a move, including the dropping of leaflets, arrests of draft dodgers, and replacement of the republic procurator probably would lead to terrorist acts against Moscow-appointed republic authorities and even against authorities in Moscow. In effect, Moscow may have to choose between stopping at economic sanctions and political rhetoric, which would not stop the independence drive in Georgia, or escalate the conflict to include significant military coercion. [redacted]

The Events in Lithuania: Repercussions in Georgia

Both moderate groups have said that they are using the Lithuanian drive for independence as a model, and Georgians have been watching carefully the events in Lithuania. A large demonstration was held in Tbilisi on 24 March in support of Lithuania. Demonstrators condemned Moscow's behavior and demanded that the Georgian government officially declare Georgia has no economic claims on Lithuania. [redacted]

Gorbachev's reaction to the Lithuanian situation will have different implications to different groups of Georgian nationalists. The moderates are likely to see his hard line as further evidence that independence should be achieved gradually through negotiations, and that precipitate steps should not be taken. They would therefore not change their basic platform. Radicals, however, may perceive these events as proof that Moscow will never willingly allow a republic to secede and that Lithuania's peaceful approach was inherently faulty. They may therefore step up efforts to put teeth in Georgia's independence moves, by spearheading a drive to block military conscription in Georgia, pressing for dissolution of the republic Soviet as illegitimate and agitating--possibly violently--for withdrawal of the Soviet "occupation army" in Georgia. [redacted]

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