

Georgia Seen from Abroad

[Click here to print this page](#)



[Enlarge This Image](#)



Hans-Juergen Zahorka knows Georgia and the South Caucasus from several EU projects for which he worked in Tbilisi, and also from an information centre he set up within the think-tank of which he is the director, LIBERTAS – European Institute GmbH. He was a Member of the European Parliament and now works as a Government Advisor in Eastern Europe and the CIS. Frequently he advises companies who want to set up their offices or productions in Georgia. He is about to finish a book called "How Far the European Union Should Reach" ("Wohin die Europäische Union wachsen wird"), where according to Dr. Zahorka he rewrote pages on Georgia completely after November 2007.

GT: The dialogue between the government and the opposition still remains patchy. The current government asks for stability and dialogue, however refuses to concede to the opposition and fulfill its prior demands, the recount of the votes at some precincts and access to the video footage from cameras at the polling stations. So, what should the West, specifically the EU, do in order to help the two sides sit down and begin discussing the key

issues for Georgia?

At first, Georgia should determine itself how to overcome the lack of true dialogue between the two sides of the past. The West can of course help here. But what is the West? It is the European Union, with which Georgia has more economic relations and should have – in the wider sense – a common political culture, and it is the USA, where the present administration considers Georgia a favourite pet and also uses this country in a not very sophisticated way. But the future of Georgia will not be the next US federal state, but rather within the European Union. This was dealt a big blow by the Georgian president when he decided to defuse tensions not by political means but with riot police and declaration of the state of emergency – something European governments are extremely thrifty with in comparable situations, and this has been often considered a failure of the first big test of internal statesmanship after the Rose Revolution. And it – this has to be seen in Georgia – threw a light on this country, where scenarios have been made, what happens if e.g. the problem of the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be treated like this – instead of political means. In the EU we have a clear policy to solve this kind of problems only with peaceful, non-violent means, see the reunification of Germany, see the current negotiations with Cyprus, see Montenegro, see Czech Republic and Slovakia, etc.

GT: And Kosovo?

Kosovo has nothing to do with any of the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus or elsewhere. If the previous president Milosevic had made a functioning federation of Yugoslavia, it would still exist as such. He chose violence and nationalism, and now every ex-Yugoslav republic is a state in its own right. The only way to create and preserve stability in the Balkans, also economically, is to include them all in the EU. In this context, it would be deadly for Serbia to bet on Russia alone – Russia in the Balkans can never replace the EU, which is a clearly non-nationalistic event.

But let me come back to your question: The West cannot force both sides to sit down. At first, there are still some reserves towards the newly elected president, who may be president indeed, but not with the same kind of legitimacy as a president who had been elected in a truly and consistently transparent way. So all the West can do is to remind both sides that in the EU it is part of the political culture to sit together and to find compromises. There have been some hints of this policy in Georgia since the election, but in my opinion not enough. And there are also many indications that the government camp in Georgia did not think about the reactions of the West before these measures like state of emergency etc. were set up.

Although it still is in the tradition – like in all other Caucasus countries! – the government should really do everything not to leave the impression that it is authoritarian. In the new government there is togetherness of old hands, but also some refreshing new faces. It might be the door to true pluralism after the parliamentary elections – if the parliament then really becomes a true parliament, and I could say now much more on this subject...

GT: Recently people began to think that the West practices double standard in relation to Georgia. The fact is that they support democratization of the country, however they approve the processes that contradict the

democratic principles, namely the presidential elections of Georgia on January 5 that was found to be falsified at some precincts according to an OSCE interim report (protocols were tampered with; ballots were stuffed in the ballot-boxes; etc). Consequently anti-western slogans are much more frequent than ever before. Is this anti-western sentiment within the Georgian people an irreversible phenomenon?

Well, the election as such was largely consistent with the European standards. Only some results were indeed very strange, and I refer to the many voices which doubted the results or had proofs of partly rigged elections. This has been said in the OSCE report afterwards, and these reports have a language which is immanent to these organizations, that is not always very clear. I am also disappointed by the position of the OSCE, having talked personally with some observers afterwards. I cannot blame anyone from Georgia when the OSCE or the EU as such are criticized, but one also has to take into account the clear criticism of Georgia in their reports. This criticism is the more devastating the closer a country wants to be in the centripetal range of the European Union. There is nobody from the EU who says that the events from November 2007 and the election from 5th January have brought Georgia closer to the EU. Also, the result of the referendum on NATO can only be considered a unilateral expression of interest.

I am sure that the present emotions, which I fully understand, are only a temporary phenomenon. This will be solved with time, and when people who then will be better informed look in a more complicated way to more complicated contexts.

GT: Recently I have heard quite frequently that the western organizations that monitored the presidential elections in Georgia prepared the positive report on election on purpose in order to avoid demonstrations and/ or "revolutionary" change of the government and/or instability in a country earlier called by the U.S. "the beacon of democracy." While saying "positive report" I mean the very line in the OSCE report which says "the election was consistent with democratic commitments and standards". So what is your comment on this type of attitude to the international reports?

As I said, I am not very happy with the OSCE report. There were some articulations by OSCE representatives in the same direction! But if you see how the OSCE can work with these elections it is very difficult to make better reports: Observers who hardly know the country come and see – and it is expected from them to find any falsification of votes. This is very difficult! Furthermore, the whole set-up of the elections, the weeks before, the closure of opposition TV, the harassment of opposition radios, the preference of the authorities (who have to be absolutely neutral), the personal pressures on many people as we have seen this – this could hardly be registered by the observers. But it is better to have this election monitoring than not.

GT: On January 14 U.S. president George Bush congratulated Saakashvili on becoming the president of Georgia and that – most importantly – invited him to the White House, despite the very fact that the elections were not 100% democratic. Which factors have determined the favorable disposition of the U.S. towards Georgia?

The U.S. president is said to be a big friend of the Georgian president. It is fine that he after all congratulated – all others did the same. That he invited him to the White House is also usual. His term of office will soon finish, however, and I doubt that Georgia will have the same place on the U.S. agenda afterwards. After all – did there come adequate investment from the U.S., is there much trade with them? Then there is the factor of Russia. Georgia has not followed a very sophisticated policy towards Russia in the last years – it even looks like a repetition of the good guys/bad guys policy principles of the U.S. Very little differentiation, or distinction, only black and white, no grey tones. It would be better if this country clearly leaned towards the EU and talked less about NATO – although not losing sight of NATO – provided it follows internal reforms and consequently the rule of law and democracy.

And in this context, I just mentioned investment and trade. Since November 2007, several possible investors from Europe have shied away from Georgia – unfortunately. And growth rates are not everything – one also has to achieve participation of unprivileged people, and in this context I think Georgia has a lot to do now in regional policy. Before November 2007, I was among the very few who saw Georgia coming to the EU, maybe in 15-20 years. The events then may have temporarily delayed developments for 5 or so years. Of course, it is difficult to forecast in years. But I am sorry to say that the president of Georgia, of whose achievements I was fully convinced until November 2007, made big mistakes and created a kind of immanent mistrust among others within the EU. The EU, however, will be needed – probably more than the U.S! – as every country needs an alternative for going-alone, or for another kind of integration nobody in Georgia can really want.

Tamar Gamkrelidze

1.02.2008

Close Window

Copyright ©2006, "Georgia Today"

Using materials of the site the reference on "Georgia Today" with the indication of the author is obligatory

Webmaster