Georgia’s Uncertain Democracy

On March 26, the Harriman Institute and the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies hosted a distinguished panel of scholars to discuss Lincoln Mitchell’s recent book, Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia’s Rose Revolution. Professor Mitchell is the Arnold A. Saltzman Professor in the Practice of International Politics at Columbia University, he previously served as chief of party for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Georgia from 2002-4.

Valerie Bunce, Professor of Government and the Aaron Binenkorb Chair of International Studies at Cornell University, began by listing four major contributions of the book: 1) In contrast with most “high-altitude” analyses, which tend to be “removed from the ground,” Mitchell’s book was refreshingly “down-to-earth”; 2) the book provides a rich treatment of the transition stages which weak states, undergo—“hybrid regimes,” where democracy is difficult to consolidate, are often the result of such transitions, as in the case of Georgia under Saakashvili; 3) most importantly, according to Bunce, the book presents a nuanced picture of the U.S. democracy and governance assistance programs, which the author characterizes as “neither consistent nor ambitious,...confused and directionless”; 4) the book makes it clear that despite its flaws, democracy assistance has remained and will remain firmly embedded in the fabric of U.S. foreign policy. In addition to these four contributions, Bunce praised the book for its incisive critique of the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the damage they have done to the cause of the “larger democracy-promotion project.”

Apart from the overwhelmingly positive review, Bunce felt that the author may have presented an “uncritical” view of the Shevardnadze-Saakashvili transition: after all, the most “checkered cases,” according to Bunce, are parliamentary-based seizures of power, as in the case of Georgia’s Rose and Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip revolutions. Mitchell responded that not only was he “uncritical” of the events of the Rose Revolution, but, in fact, supportive. According to the author, among President Shevardnadze’s blunders which helped seal his fate were his failure to right the wrongs committed during the campaign and the election itself, including instances of ballot-stuffing, double-counting and others. Having in effect “stolen” the elections, Shevardnadze then refused to compromise, and in the end lost.

In response to the question regarding what the author thought of non-military interventions to promote democracy, Mitchell expressed his steadfast support for the idea, adding that much
space in the book is devoted to clarifying common misunderstandings of democracy assistance as such. Mitchell lamented the fact that despite all the changes in the world, much of the democracy-promotion approach remains “rooted in the 1990s” and urged scholars and policy-makers to revisit the “politics and the technical side of how we do assistance.”

Charles King, Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University, began by noting that it was somewhat ironic that President Saakashvili himself had a quote printed on the back cover calling the book “essential reading.” The irony, for King, lies with the book’s portrayal of the Georgian President as a “questionable democrat” at best. In agreement with “most of its conclusions,” King praised the book for being the most “even-handed and theoretically-informed” treatment of the Rose Revolution. The areas where the scholar wished to see more elaboration included how the interplay among “outside democratizers”, people on the streets and the ruling regime to make the Rose revolution happen when it did; as well as the subsequent role of the Russia factor. In contrast with Saakashvili, Shevardnadze never equated the survival of his regime with national survival. Finally, does Saakashvili’s governing style have to do more with the state of democracy in Georgia than that with Russia?

Characterizing the U.S. democracy assistance programs in Georgia under Shevardnadze as “massive” and reaching a wide spectrum of civil society actors, Mitchell added that it was easy to “work outside the government and be critical of it,” since Shevardnadze was not a dictator per se. By 2003, “most of the capable” people in government had abandoned Shevardnadze to go either into political opposition or join the civil society, forcing the former president to make a turn to Aslan Abashidze, by then the “most undemocratic force in all of Georgia.” The author drew a parallel with the current situation, as numerous capable government officials, formerly loyal to Saakashvili, have been abandoning ship by going into open opposition—a “troubling sign,” according to Mitchell. Commenting on the Russia factor, Mitchell agreed with the view that the thrust of Saakashvili’s international outreach, his very vocal plea for help from the West, has been: “you are either with [Saakashvili] or with Putin.” Russia’s existential threat to Georgia is real, the author believes, though Saakashvili himself may be contributing to it, having lost much of his international support and good will and thus having strengthened Russia’s hand.

Lorne Craner, President of the International Republican Institute (IRI) and former Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor under Secretary of State Colin Powell, provided a detailed, chapter-by-chapter review of the book, praising it for its accurate account of “Misha’s [Saakashvili’s] governing style” and its prediction of further tensions in Georgia’s political establishment in the near future. Where the book could “go further” and be “more nuanced” was in its analysis of the U.S. policy towards Georgia: as Craner pointed out, Mitchell did not interview enough U.S. policymakers for the book. Among Craner’s criticisms of Mitchell’s analysis was the latter’s failure to note that Washington wanted and pushed for democratic parliamentary elections in 2003, “regardless whether Shevardnadze would survive them or not.” Likewise, the author neglected to provide an account of the deterioration of Secretary of State Powell’s and Saakashvili’s relations following the Rose revolution. Both these points, and the fact of the contentious arguments which took place among Washington’s power-brokers and diplomats under the Bush administration regarding the U.S. policy toward Georgia, according to
Craner, dispute one of the book’s conclusions which presents the decision-making community as “monolithic.”

Mitchell readily conceded the former Assistant Secretary’s criticism of the book’s treatment of Washington’s policy-making process as being its “weakest link.” The author pointed out, however, that in contrast with the establishment’s open-minded approach toward Georgia prior to 2003—when some officials continued to support Shevardnadze, while others openly declared their admiration of opposition figures such as Zurab Zvania or Mikheil Saakashvili—the official position of the U.S. government following the Rose revolution has been an unwavering support of the current president, the internal debates within and between the State Department and the White House notwithstanding. In this respect, Mitchell found remarkable the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza’s recent statement following the arrests of a number of opposition activists, where he, among other demands, urged Saakashvili’s government to order an investigation into the allegations made against them.

Chris Walker, Director of Studies at Freedom House, told the audience that Georgia under President Saakashvili has been “one of the most difficult” countries for Freedom House to grade in its annual “Freedom in the World” report. In the 1990s, the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union followed uneven trajectories in their democratic development, with the Baltic States having successfully adopted a Western model of governance, while the countries in Central Asia fell back, in some cases further behind than the Soviet model. Although Georgia prior to 2003 was considered one of the “better performers,” lying somewhere in the middle of the continuum, “no one could expect” the democratic breakthrough of the Rose revolution. The phenomenon of color revolutions led to “unrealistic hopes and expectations,” which have gradually been shattered, at least in Georgia. In the past few years, Georgia’s ranking was lowered in several important indicators in the “Freedom in the World” report, including freedoms of assembly and expression.

Walker labeled as fallacy the widespread view that democracy assistance consists exclusively of grant-making; rather, promoting democratic values also involves intense diplomatic efforts—something that both the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, the EU, have neglected to do in Georgia, failing to exert strong enough pressure on President Saakashvili’s government to stay on the chosen democratic path. “What would Georgia have to do to be a part of the ‘solution’ rather than the ‘problem’ when it comes to democracy-building worldwide?” asked Walker.

Mitchell reiterated his agreement with Saakashvili’s claim that Russia poses an existential threat to the Georgian state and expressed his sympathy for the latter for the serious problems that it is facing. President Saakashvili and his government must understand though, the author continued, that it “should not be the end of the world” when they lose elections or are subjected to criticism in the press, but rather accept these in a democratic fashion. “It may be too late,” though, for the current Georgian government to be a “meaningful agent in the democracy-promotion business,” Mitchell concluded.

- Peter Zalmayev