

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Overcoming Warlords and State Failure: Lessons from Post-Soviet Georgia

On Wednesday, November 11, 2009, Kimberly Marten, Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, spoke at the Harriman Institute about two Georgian warlords—Aslan Abashidze and Emzar Kvitsiani. Marten discussed their influence in Georgia, and the divergent approaches towards warlordism taken by the administrations of Georgian leaders Eduard Shevardnadze (1992-03) and Mikheil Saakashvili (2003-present).

Marten, who is writing a book on “Warlords, Sovereignty, and State Failure,” just returned from Georgia, where she conducted 26 interviews with policy makers and analysts connected to these cases. Her findings were the basis for her presentation and will comprise a chapter in her book. “Until now there have been ideographic studies of warlordism, but not a body of theory about the relationships between states and warlords. There is nothing to indicate what happens when states take particular actions toward warlords.” Marten seeks to formulate this body of theory in her work.

“I define warlords as individuals who control small slices of territory in defiance of state sovereignty, through the use of force and patronage.” Marten clarified that while warlords function against state interests, this does not exclude their cooperation with the state. Warlords can infiltrate the bureaucracy and often extend their patronage to the government.

Warlords sometimes maintain control through clans. “The body of political science literature indicates that clans can form a parallel government structure,” but as Marten remarked, “clans are not as strong as the current literature suggests.” Saakashvili demonstrated that it was “easy to peel away clan supporters with promises of better conditions.”

There are cases of warlordism across the globe, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and Somalia. The political economy of warlordism is similar across cases. Marten feels that Georgia is

particularly interesting to examine because of how differently two of its administrations have responded to warlords. While Shevardnadze accommodated the warlords’ needs, in part because he felt intimidated and in part because he benefited from the connections, Saakashvili unseated these leaders and restored Georgia’s sovereignty over their territories. “To my knowledge this is the only case in modern history where state leaders have dealt so differently with warlordism in the same country,” noted Marten. She added that Abashidze and Kvitsiani were what she calls “middlemen” warlords, because they remained in power with Russian or Abkhazian support, operating between two states—Russia and Georgia.

Aslan Abashidze was a high-ranking official in both the Georgian and the Ajarian Communist parties until the fall of the Soviet Union. “This means that he had a lot of connections with political figures emerging in the post-Soviet space,” Marten said. In 1991 Abashidze was elected chairman of the Parliament of Ajara. Marten explained that his election was semi-legal. Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had pressured the chairman of the parliament to resign and then swayed the parliament to elect Abashidze. “While Abashidze’s election was technically legal, it was actually an exercise of force.” Simultaneously Abashidze became deputy chairman of Georgia’s national parliament and remained in this position for several years.

Once Abashidze became chairman he formed his own militia and created a border separating Ajara from the rest of Georgia, forcing Georgian citizens to show their passports when they crossed the border, and stamping their passports with Ajaran “visas.”

Using the civil war in Georgia as an excuse, Abashidze dissolved the parliament with an emergency decree. In response, local political leaders sent an open letter to Georgian authorities, calling Abashidze’s actions illegal. Despite this,

Shevardnadze continued to accommodate the separatist leader, treating him as an ally and helping him win elections through backdoor deals.

Under Shevardnadze's presidency Abashidze was able to establish a separate National Security Council and Interior Ministry. He used these institutions to terrorize the population of Ajara. According to the Saakashvili government, he also ran a \$100 million narcotics smuggling ring, and appropriated the national oil taxes from the Batumi oil terminal.

Marten elaborated that oil would arrive in Batumi (Ajara's capital) via the Black Sea, where it would be transferred to rail cars. Abashidze would bribe Georgian Railway Ministry officials to say that all oil delivered through the railway was going beyond Georgian borders. Transit oil is supposed to be tax-free, but Abashidze would have customs officials collect taxes from the shippers, and then keep the money in Ajara instead of sending it to state authorities. The oil would then be distributed within Georgia, instead of beyond its borders, following Abashidze's orders to the Railway Ministry. As a result Georgia lost over 60% of its oil tax revenue to Abashidze.

Shevardnadze also made electoral deals with Abashidze's Revival party and allowed the Abashidze clan to control all government posts in Ajara. Marten indicated that these electoral deals helped to provoke Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003.

"In 2003, Shevardnadze announced that he would not run for reelection in 2005, and people were frightened," Marten recounted, since it appeared that Shevardnadze had anointed Abashidze as his chosen successor. Abashidze had a supposed tremendous "official" electoral victory in 2003, but as independent exit polls showed, this victory was clearly fixed. People worried as a result that once Shevardnadze's term came to an end, there would be another engineering of elections in Abashidze's favor. "Georgians were scared that Abashidze would lead the country in Shevardnadze's place."

The efforts of the Rose Revolution demonstrators in Fall 2003 brought down Shevardnadze and replaced him with Saakashvili, who later was elected president in the snap election of January 2004. "Saakashvili had overwhelming popular support, even in Ajara," remarked Marten. In response to the Rose Revolution, Abashidze declared a state of emergency in Ajara, lashing out against protestors in the region.

This immediately created a different dynamic between Saakashvili and Abashidze than the one that had existed between the warlord and

Shevardnadze. Both Georgian officials and analysts and the international community feared there might be a military clash.

At one point Abashidze stationed tanks on the Choloki Bridge, which separates Ajara from the rest of Georgia along the main highway. At another point he blew up the bridge, saying that he was preventing Georgian forces from invading. Marten showed the audience a photograph of the bridge and the river below it; the river is actually quite shallow and narrow. "Standing on the bridge I realized that the majority of this situation was just theater; the Georgians could have easily sent forces and crossed the river."

Abashidze was sent into exile in May 2004. The Georgian government presented Saakashvili's victory over the warlord as a reflection of both the state's strength and the overwhelming popular support that Saakashvili and the Rose Revolution had generated. Among other pressure tactics, Saakashvili had closed Ajara's airspace, blocked the Batumi Port, closed the Sarpi customs point and frozen the bank accounts of Ajarian officials.

Marten concluded that a full explanation for Saakashvili's success, however, also includes his ability to peel off Abashidze's supporters. "He didn't really make a clean sweep, but just dusted off the furniture and rearranged it." While the media dwelled on Saakashvili's hardliner tactics and popularity, there is more to the story. He "wooed a lot of Abashidze supporters with promises of immunity from prosecution, allowing the wealthy to keep their wealth and political positions in exchange for donations to the state of Ajara."

Abashidze was not punished—he has lived luxuriously in Moscow since his exile. Saakashvili replaced him with Levan Varshalomidze, the son of Abashidze's former Prime Minister. He was installed without elections, and wields enormous power in Ajara on behalf of the Saakashvili regime.

If Saakashvili had not had somewhat authoritarian control over Ajara, he would have been unable to unseat Abashidze, since an independent judiciary might not have agreed to give immunity to his supporters and an independent electorate might not have wanted to see his supporters in political office. Furthermore, Saakashvili's tactics may not be applicable in states that lack developed bureaucracies and popular leaders, such as Afghanistan.

Marten described Emzar Kvitsiani as a "gang leader and a jailbird" who controlled several of Abkhazia's casinos. He got his start as a separatist leader in 1993, during the Abkhazia-Georgia war, commanding a militia called the Monadire ("Hunter"). A number of Abkhazian refugees fled

to Georgia proper through Kodori Gorge, a mountainous region in Abkhazia that extends to the northeast from Sukhumi. Militias that may have included Kvitsiani supporters destroyed the road through the gorge, forcing the refugees to travel by foot and then demanding payment for their safe passage.

The 1994 Moscow Agreement ceasefire between Georgia and Abkhazia legitimized Kvitsiani's control over Upper Kodori, referring to that small area as a demilitarized zone where "local civil authorities" would provide security. These authorities were the Monadire.

Shevardnadze did not try to confront Kvitsiani until 1999, when he sent a delegation from Tbilisi to Upper Kodori. "The upper part of Kodori Gorge is difficult to reach—for eight months out of the year you can only get there by helicopter on clear days," remarked Marten. "Kvitsiani's militia greeted the delegation and then beat them up, shoving them back into the helicopter they came from."

During his reign Kvitsiani led a timber smuggling operation that sent local lumber tax-free to Turkey through Abkhazia. He also had control over Tbilisi's electricity supply, holding hostage the high voltage power line that ran over Upper Kodori from Russia, and plunging Tbilisi into blackouts when he was unhappy with Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze paid Kvitsiani \$50,000 a month in "humanitarian aid" in return for the security of Tbilisi's electricity.

Saakashvili sought to change this situation. Two of his major advisors, Irakli Alasania, chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhazia-government-in-exile, and Irakli Okruashvili, the defense minister, disagreed about which path to take in dealing with the region, however. Alasania wanted to reform the Monadire, while Okruashvili deemed the Monadire useless and wanted to implement armed police action and overthrow Kvitsiani.

In 2006 the Georgian government took militarized police action, sending troops into the mountains to overthrow Kvitsiani. While a few Kvitsiani supporters shot at the Georgians, it is clear that there was an agreement made between the Georgian side and the Monadire to avoid major bloodshed. For example, it took 12-13 hours for the Georgian forces to drive up the mountains to Upper Kodori; the Monadire had clear sight lines, and could have laid mines on the road, but chose not to do so. "The Monadire melted away and the Georgian troops captured 35 wanted criminals." Marten speculates that this was the result of a similar type of deal to the one with Abashidze's clan.

Unlike the Abashidze deal, the Kvitsiani deal did not go according to plan. "Everyone I interviewed tells me that something in this deal went wrong, but no one knows what it was." Kvitsiani was supposed to have stayed in Tbilisi, but instead he went back to Kodori. There was not supposed to be shooting from Kvitsiani's side, but there was some shooting from a small number of his supporters.

After the raid, Kvitsiani managed to escape, and some say the Abkhaz had agreed to jail him but did not. "My understanding is that if the deal had gone properly, Kvitsiani would be in Tbilisi or perhaps imprisoned right now." There is speculation that when the authorities could not get Kvitsiani, they captured his sister Nora and imprisoned her instead. "There were people far guiltier than Nora and this appears to have been a symbolic move, because the authorities couldn't get Kvitsiani," Marten noted.

After Georgia regained control of this small section of Abkhazia, Saakashvili moved the Abkhazia-government-in-exile from Tbilisi to Kodori Gorge, and pledged to spend \$10 million per year from the state budget on reconstruction, to make the area a show case for the rest of Abkhazia and attract Abkhazians back into Georgia's fold.

Reconstruction efforts had actually started in summer 2005, when Kvitsiani was living in Tbilisi, and appear to have been part of the effort to woo Kvitsiani's supporters. These expenditures would likely not have been possible if real democratic debate were allowed in Georgia, since at this time the entire social services budget of Georgia was only \$350 million per year, and the country is burdened by poverty, unemployment, and healthcare and education systems that need great reform. Georgian authorities also deployed U.S.-made weapons in the region.

These gestures, alongside Saakashvili's claim that he was making the new "Upper Abkhazia" a showcase, aggravated Russia and contributed to the tensions leading to the 2008 war. "Saakashvili's biggest mistake was in pulling the tail of the tiger," contended Marten. Upper Kodori was retaken by Russian-supported Abkhaz forces in the war, in a move that was clearly coordinated with actions in South Ossetia. Meanwhile Kvitsiani is rumored to be living freely in Abkhazia.

Marten concluded that "the message to learn from these cases is that warlords themselves are pretty expendable." Their supporters can be easily peeled away by a strong state, and as middlemen they may be useful for protecting realist power interests, but are not worth going to war over.

“Russia was not interested in the individuals,” Marten said. “What went wrong in Upper Kodori was probably that Saakashvili pushed too hard.” What Saakashvili demonstrated, though, is that success in dealing with warlords may be easiest for a state that is not a liberal democracy.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner