

The Day After:
President Mikheil Saakashvili on Post-Revolutionary Societies &
What Comes After the Arab Spring

United States Institute of Peace

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to be here today.

The Institute is indeed a remarkable institution.

It stands as a testament to the American people's commitment to build a safer, freer, and more peaceful world.

We are only steps away from monuments that bear witness to the sacrifices the United States has made acting on that commitment — in Europe, in Asia, and in other lands.

The leadership and scholarship of the US Institute for Peace stand in that noble tradition.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to J. Robinson West, the Chairman of the Institute, and to Richard Solomon, its President.

I understand Richard has just announced that he is stepping down after 19 years of extraordinary success.

Even from as far away as Georgia, we can see clearly that Richard has built the Institute into a global leader in conflict resolution—an area that has special meaning and importance to the people of Georgia—especially for our up to 500 000 IDPs and refugees expelled from the regions illegally occupied by the Russian Federation.

I am also very grateful to Damon Wilson of the Atlantic Council—for being our moderator today and—more important—for his profound commitment to understanding my country and its Euro-Atlantic path .

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I came here to talk about the wave of revolutions, changes, and protests that the world has witnessed over the past year and is still witnessing today.

The media dubbed these movements as “the Arab Spring,” but they span far beyond the Middle East and the spring season, respecting no limits—of time, geography, or culture.

These revolutions and protests remind all of us that freedom, democracy, and accountability matter and even that they matter more than anything else.

More than cultural, political, religious or social differences, more than fake stabilities and geographic borders.

They inspire citizens from the most diverse backgrounds to unite and to undertake the bravest of actions.

They move nations and reshape the security environment.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, we are barely one year past that historic moment in December 2010 when an unknown Tunisian citizen named Mouhamad Bouazizi set himself on fire in the remote town of Sidi Bouzid.

Thirteen months later, we note with amazement how this isolated act of despair has changed the course of history and our perception of the world.

Tunisia's dictator Ben Ali was toppled one month later.

The fearless crowds in Tahrir Square defeated Mubarak's regime.

Governments from Morocco to Saudi Arabia acceded at a diverse extent to public demands for reforms.

Muammar Gaddafi and his despotic regime were overthrown.

And the protests grew well beyond the Middle East, including to the streets of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and so many other Russian cities.

We can barely grasp all that has happened over these past 13 months, nor can we know where these diverse events will lead.

We cannot foresee which of these movements will produce Jeffersons, and which Lenins; which will lead to democracy, and which to disappointment or tyranny.

Just beyond these windows, over on the Washington Mall, disoriented tourists can turn for guidance to maps that helpfully tell them, “YOU ARE HERE.”

Unfortunately, on this side of Constitution Avenue, where diplomats and scholars try to anticipate the flow of world events, there are no such markers.

Yet, even without a clear map, we can turn for guidance to a series of events that shared several common elements— from the velvet revolutions of the late 80s to the color revolutions of the early 2000s, including the one in my own country that CNN graciously baptized the Rose Revolution.

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My dear friends,

Georgia’s experience does not provide a transferable model for the many countries that have known or will sooner or later know pro-democracy uprisings.

There was no “freedom textbook” for us, and there is no textbook for our friends in Tunisia, Libya, or elsewhere.

But, by reflecting on our own post-revolutionary experiences, we might well gain a better appreciation of the diverse challenges these societies in transition face.

Our own peaceful, popular revolution in 2003 brought to power a team of young people who wanted to change the fate of their country and whom I was privileged to lead.

Obviously, we had no clear answers for how to fix a country that turned out to be in even worse shape than we had thought.

In 2003, Georgia was an utterly failed state.

We found the treasury was literally empty and we had no ability to fund basic public services.

Electricity was sporadic and in short supply.

Corruption was the country's leading industry and strongest institution.

Policemen were not paid and— - in order to finance their salaries - —they were expected to extort the public.

Regional warlords held more power than public officials.

Crime was literally at every corner of every street.

The educational system was crippled by corruption and aimed only to protect the privileges of a small elite.

To top it all off, we lived in a dangerous neighborhood, with an increasingly revisionist Russian Federation at our door.

Aware that half-measures would be useless and that our windows for reforms would be small, we adopted a whole-of-government approach, seeking to radically transform multiple institutions simultaneously.

All at once, we undertook to change the police, the tax collection, the customs, the security services, the energy sector, and the education system.

Our overarching priority was a full frontal assault against corruption.

Corruption was a virus that had infected all of our institutions, rotting and crippling them.

Corruption was also the main focus of public anger.

Just yesterday, the World Bank issued a major new study—entitled “Fighting Corruption in Public Services-Chronicling Georgia's Reforms”—which details what our government did to fight corruption, and how Georgia's experience might inform anti-corruption efforts in other countries.

There are summaries of this study outside this hall, but let me quote to you what is perhaps the most heartening observation that the World Bank made:

“Georgia’s success destroys the myth that corruption is cultural and gives hope to reformers everywhere who aspire to clean up their public services.”

The cliché that some cultures, people, or regions are inherently corrupt or allergic to transparency has been proven absolutely wrong in my country.

In one blow, we fired 16,000 traffic police, who had turned Georgia’s streets into boulevards of extortion, and gradually replaced them with a much smaller, professional, well-trained force that is today one of Georgia’s most respected institutions.

We fired corrupt tax collectors, hired young ones, simplified the tax system, and began applying our tax laws equitably. By doing so, we multiplied our tax revenues, which allowed us to begin providing real public services.

We created a single, nationwide, computer-scored, merit-based admissions test for university, to end a decades-long practice that made bribes the key entry qualification—the going rate had started at about \$8,000, more than the average Georgian’s annual income.

Our ambition was clear: to give people the sense that they own their State.

And it could not succeed without a whole of society approach.

Any change of governance has to be accompanied by a radical social transformation in order to be efficient and sustainable.

Soviet Union and post-soviet regimes, like all authoritarian systems, based their survival by nurturing the divisions of the society.

People were artificially opposed to each other at every level and in every field. The different religious, social, and ethnic groups were made to be constant rivals, and politics was understood as an art of manipulation, fear, and hatred.

So our first task was to embrace multiculturalism and differences. We developed an affirmative action program that covered all spheres, from higher education to law enforcement bodies.

This approach is not always popular among certain social institutions, but we are determined to keep making it a core priority of our action.

Because at stake is the democratic identity of our nation.

Last year – unfortunately against the will of almost all political parties and NGOs - we passed a law that grants legal status to all faith communities in Georgia.

The Soviet Union and the post-soviet regimes had another characteristic—absolute centralization.

So we initiated a vast decentralization program, invested in regional development infrastructure, and spectacularly empowered local authorities.

As a result, regions that were once abandoned became the most striking examples of our development.

And people feel everywhere that they have a stake in their country's fate. Not only dozens of thousands of privileged citizens in downtown Tbilisi.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The main achievement of the last 8 years—the key to all the other successes—was not so much a function of the Government but of the Georgian people themselves: Our institutional revolution was enabled by the “mental revolution” that took place in our country.

Only a mental revolution could lead to the Western transformation of our society.

Today, Georgians have totally changed the way they think—of themselves, of their prerogatives, of their responsibilities, and of their relationship to society and government.

Of course, many of our reforms have not produced the results we had hoped to achieve and we are still very much a work in progress.

But nobody can reverse or suppress the transformation that happened in Georgia. Neither us nor anybody else.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If I had to sum up the lessons I can draw from our own experience and share with our friends elsewhere, I would quote the following points:

1 - No matter how beautiful and moving popular uprisings are, the real revolution occurs after the cameras from CNN and BBC and Al Jazeera have left the country.

It consists in the long and difficult process of reform that follows.

2 - only a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to reform can bring tangible, enduring results.

The reforms of the judiciary, police, tax collection, customs, political class, electoral code, and education system should not be implemented individually, but as part of a complete project of social transformation.

If even one of these areas is left untouched, then the virus of cynicism will undermine the credibility of the entire effort.

3 - You need to put your popularity at risk right away.

When you attack interest groups, they bite back—and you will face difficult times.

We had our share of demonstrations and opposition; I had to resign before the end of my first term in order to win a new popular mandate to keep up the path of reforms.

But when you are carried to power by popular uprising, the greatest risk you face is your own inaction—the temptation to temporize in order to enjoy your original popularity.

After a revolution, people feel empowered and impatient. They want quick results. And once they become disillusioned and cynical, you have lost the opportunity for change.

4 – Because, in order to succeed, you need the people to be an active part of your reforms.

The citizens, after all, are the real motor of the transformation.

Woodrow Wilson had it right when he said: “Liberty has never come from Government. Liberty has always come from the subjects of it.”.

5—and critically important: The fight is never finished.

In Georgia, the biggest mistake we could make would be to contemplate our rankings by international organizations or read the World Bank book, feel smug about our successes, and conclude that we made it once and for all.

It would undermine all of our achievements. And it is why the reforms should never stop.

Governing is a process of constant learning, questioning, adaptation, and change. This is what every authoritarian regime always fails to understand.

We will not make this mistake in Georgia.

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My dear Friends

Revolutions are fought and won by the citizens of these countries.

But all of us in the international community should do what we can to help.

In Georgia's case, a wide range of international think tanks and NGOs, education programs or scholarships, helped sow the seeds of our revolution.

Ever since, we have done what we can to provide advice and assistance to those in other countries who are trying to forge a similar path, just as we have benefited greatly from the experience of others, especially NDI and IRI, which have shown such profound dedication to Georgia—and which continue to show vision and courage in other parts of the world, as we see today in Egypt.

We might have disagreements sometimes, but I want to ensure NDI, IRI, NED, Freedom House and all the major actors of the democracy community of this town, the vibrant heart of Washington, that Georgia will always be like their home.

We know too much what we owe to their commitment and their dedication to freedom.

And, at a time when many major powers are struggling with sluggish economies and government deficits, when there is an understandable temptation to cut back on supporting such activities, I would like to remind what a high value investment the support for democracy is.

The movement toward democracy does not solve every problem or enhance security in every case. But on balance we will all be more secure with fewer dictatorships and more democracies.

When aspiring populations are free to live their lives, practice their trades, raise their children, voice their ideas, and press their grievances, the space shrinks for the kinds of leaders who sow ethnic hatreds, harbor terrorists, or wage aggression.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We can compare the sudden upheavals of 2011 and the ongoing protests to what Nassim Nicholas Taleb has called Black Swans—improbable, high-impact events which amaze us as outliers when they appear, yet in retrospect seem obvious or inevitable.

They take us by surprise and force us to recalculate our sense of the possible.

They are redefining the international arena, redistributing the cards between regional and global players.

Seen from our part of the world, two radically different attitudes emerge, embodied by two specific regional powers.

On the one hand, the Russian Federation reacted with panic and outrage to the Arab Spring and tries everything it can to prevent any international support to the democracy movement, anywhere.

On the other, Turkey asserts itself as a role model for the post-revolutionary countries and the main friend of freedom lovers from the muslim world.

On the one hand, the government of PM Putin that desperately tries to halt the progress of History.

On the other, the administration of PM Erdogan that decided to embrace the evolutions of the world.

And it is not a coincidence if Russian influence is decreasing while Turkish leadership is growing everyday.

This is a lesson and a message of hope: there is no future for global powers playing against the will of the people.

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Ladies and gentlemen:

As most of you know it, on Monday, I had the honor to meet President Obama in the Oval Office.

I was impressed by his vision and his knowledge of the dynamics of my region.

Of course, I was pleased to hear him telling the media that Georgia had become “the role model of democracy and transparency” in the region and praising the institution building that has taken place.

These were humbling words to hear, and I am grateful to President Obama for his unwavering support.

But we could never have achieved so much without the United States, its leadership, its diplomacy and its NGOs.

On Monday, President Obama vowed deeper and continued engagement—in pursuing a free trade agreement, in shoring up our defense capabilities, and in pushing us forward on our path to NATO membership.

These kinds of commitments make our democracy safer and also explain why America is – and will remain - the indispensable leader of the free world.

As I stressed to President Obama, we are determined in return to be a security contributor to the Western community of nations we aspire to join, not just a security consumer.

That is why we have deployed over a thousand our soldiers fighting in the dangerous Helmand Province, including 12 who bravely paid with their lives; and we will nearly double our troop commitment in the coming months.

This is not easy for my country. It is not easy for any country. It is simply necessary.

But – and I will finish with this - the main message I wanted to carry with me to Washington is this one: there is no such thing as American decline.

Despite the economic problems and the doubts about the future, 2011 has shown that the very values on which America is based are on the rise.

People all around the world are ready to risk their lives for these values. This is a fantastic message of hope and this is what really matters at the end of the day.

It means that authoritarian models might look strong and present impressive growth rates but they propose no credible and universal alternative.

It was a mistake to proclaim the End of History after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and to think that the progress of liberal democratic values in the world would not be challenged anymore.

Let's not make the opposite mistake now.

Let's not give in to pessimism, depression or relativism.

Let's not overlook the universal call for freedom that we are witnessing in the most diverse parts of our world.

Because in this call lies the true motor and the true meaning of History.

Thank you,