



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

SEIZING THE REFORM MOMENT: REBUILDING GEORGIA'S POLICE, 2004-2006

SYNOPSIS

In 2003, the bloodless Rose Revolution ushered in an era of unprecedented reform in the Republic of Georgia. Widespread dissatisfaction with the undemocratic and corrupt post-Soviet regime culminated in the 2004 election of Mikheil Saakashvili as president. Riding a wave of popular support and eager to act before the political winds shifted, Saakashvili immediately targeted the corrupt police service, seen by many Georgians as the epitome of state dysfunction. By the end of 2006, his administration had abolished a KGB-style security ministry and its related police unit, dismissed every member of the country's uniformed police and created a new police force from scratch. By 2009, it was clear that the reformers' strategy—capitalize on public support, think boldly, act quickly and fix mistakes as they arise—had produced significant progress.

Matthew Devlin drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in the Republic of Georgia during May 2009.

INTRODUCTION

When Mikheil Saakashvili took over as Georgia's president in early 2004, he launched an ambitious plan to restructure and re-staff the country's corrupt and widely reviled police service. The challenge was daunting. As Batu Kutelia, a figure at the heart of the reform process described it, "One of my friends compared our situation to building a ship in the middle of the sea while sailing, while also learning how to sail, and while you have somebody attacking and trying to sink your ship. That was the reality."

Saakashvili had the political capital necessary to tackle the problem. He had won the January 2004 presidential election in a

landslide, taking more than 96% of the vote, and his United National Movement party swept to victory in parliamentary elections two months later. Police reform was his administration's signature initiative, the opening front in what his campaign had promised would be a government-wide anti-corruption crusade.

Willing to make radical changes even if such changes might be imperfect, the Saakashvili government succeeded in sharply improving the reputation and performance of Georgia's police by the end of 2006. In 2008, voters firmly endorsed the reforms, reelecting Saakashvili and his United National Movement party, both by comfortable majorities. Though significant challenges remained in 2009,

Georgia's experience of police reform reveals that even the most problematic institutions can be overhauled with bold vision, keen sense of timing and high-level political commitment.

THE CHALLENGE

When Saakashvili entered office in early 2004, he had just turned 36, making him one of the youngest presidents in the world at the time. Many of his cabinet and advisers were even younger. Like the president, several had attended universities in Western Europe or the United States before returning to Georgia to work in civil society organizations. When this new generation of political outsiders singled out the police for reform, they were taking on the most hardened, xenophobic and byzantine of Georgia's institutions, its dysfunction deeply rooted in the country's tumultuous history.

The Republic of Georgia emerged as an independent state with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. More than a half-century of Moscow's rule had done little to resolve the status of the country's various separatist regions, and civil war soon broke out.

In 1992, two of Georgia's powerful warlords invited former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze to return from Moscow and serve as titular head of the fast-disintegrating state.

By the mid-1990s, the northern borderlands of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had fought their way to de facto autonomy while the southwestern region of Ajaria remained only nominally part of Georgia. Armed militias proliferated and organized crime thrived.

Though more accustomed to Cold War superpower summits than civil war militia shoot-outs, Shevardnadze nevertheless deftly maneuvered himself into a newly empowered presidency by the second half of the decade, co-opting or confronting his rivals one by one along the way. His grip on power, however, was never

complete, and governmental corruption thrived under his watch.

The problem was most visible in the police. The force served as a reliable pillar of support to the regime, in return for which it was given free rein to indulge not only in corruption but outright criminality ranging from extortion to drug smuggling. The police emerged as the focal point of public dissatisfaction with Shevardnadze's rule.

Police corruption was driven by wages that were below subsistence levels. As one long-serving policeman put it: "There were months at a time when the salary was frozen. So the government was, in a way, facilitating police to become corrupt." Unable to support their families, officers joined the host of other state functionaries who exploited their authority and discretion for personal gain. In a pattern repeated across the entire government, officers arbitrarily imposed fines and fees, and pocketed receipts for themselves. As a result, the state treasury never saw enough revenue to raise the salaries that had encouraged corruption in the first place.

The same low pay allowed criminal elements to buy off entire divisions of the force. Many of those police not working for organized crime syndicates opted to simply become criminals themselves, frequently as part of the illicit drug trade.

The Ministry of State Security (MSS) epitomized several aspects of the problem. A KGB-style intelligence agency, the MSS maintained police units mirroring those of the regular policing body, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). For example, both ministries had departments dedicated to organized crime, economic crime and counter-narcotics. The inefficiencies of such duplication were obvious and were compounded by the animosity that such direct competition created between the two ministries. Intelligence agents within MSS units

also manipulated criminal investigations for the political purposes of the Shevardnadze regime, though they were not above the straightforward, and lucrative, blackmail of private citizens. The MSS perpetuated an environment of predation that Georgians detested.

Popular discontent boiled over in November 2003, as the so-called Rose Revolution ignited with widespread protests against one too many attempts by Shevardnadze to falsify election results. The grassroots movement found its champions in Saakashvili, a former minister of justice, and a group of other young politicians. Declining to use force against the unarmed protestors in the light of international media attention, Shevardnadze resigned.

Though Georgians had swarmed the streets in support of Saakashvili's all-encompassing reform program, popular opinion was somewhat more complicated when it came to the topic of police reform. Decades of police abuse had inured many to the impossibility of real change and a well-informed public was aware that police reform had never been attempted in any of Georgia's neighboring post-Soviet states. Both the country's own past and its contemporary regional environment gave little cause for optimism.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

While Saakashvili held a popular mandate for sweeping reform, it was hardly certain how long that support would last. The president recognized that he had to mark a quick and decisive break from the past and approached the problem of police reform as a Gordian knot that required slashing, bold strokes rather than painstaking disentanglement.

In October 2004, Saakashvili appointed Batu Kutelia deputy minister of state security in the MSS, directing him to dissolve the ministry by year's end. With a background in military and intelligence analysis at the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Kutelia was familiar with the culture of the MSS, though well removed from its internal politics. Unlike the brash, self-assured youthfulness of some other administration members, Kutelia was a relatively soft-spoken man with a careful cadence to his voice. He was clearly not, in the words of one former colleague, "one of the kids from the kindergarten." Just as crucially, he also was a trusted ally of Saakashvili, who later selected him to be ambassador to the United States, Georgia's most important ally at the time.

Kutelia and his colleagues began to plan how the MSS would be purged of its KGB-style elements and merged into a new, unified MIA. They immediately recognized several challenges. The first was how to decide which employees would stay on and which would be fired. In addition to dismissing agents guilty of various illegalities, an element of straightforward downsizing was also necessary because the MSS, like most Shevardnadze-era institutions, had a payroll bloated far beyond its needs.

"In many cases it was just a simple approach: that those who had relations with the Soviet KGB system shouldn't be allowed in the new type of law-enforcement agencies," Kutelia recalled. He added, however, that "honest officers received special exit allowances that allowed them to try the possibilities in other private fields."

There was no set procedure for dismissals. Kutelia and his staff wielded substantial discretion and acted quickly, navigating a grey area of personal relationships and subjective judgment. They trusted that the end would justify the means, even if some mistakes were made along the way.

Shota Utiashvili, who at the time was head of the Information and Analysis Department in the MSS, had much the same experience. Charged with merging his MSS department into its MIA counterpart, Utiashvili had to eliminate one out of every three employees in

one group, slashing its headcount to 180 from about 270. He opted to simply set a cap for each component unit within the department and then leave it to the unit chief to decide who stayed and who was dismissed.

Saakashvili and his cabinet sidestepped the legal complications of a true merger by deciding to dissolve both the MIA and the MSS, formally dismiss all the employees from both ministries, and create an entirely new MIA from the resulting unified candidate pool. “All the employees automatically lost their jobs,” Utiashvili recalled. “So I could pick and choose: I want you, I want you; but you, sorry, your mission doesn’t exist anymore.” Kutelia said he tried to ensure that MSS officials maintained their rank when they joined the new ministry, to help defuse any lingering animosities between the two ministries.

Utiashvili said he was keenly aware of the shortcomings of this subjective and imperfect system. “Sometimes we fired the people who shouldn’t have been fired ... or sometimes I brought in new guys and they did not work very well,” he conceded. He added that “If I fired somebody who was potentially good, I could later hear it from many people and I could bring the guy back.” The re-staffing effort continued for about three years. “The decisions were made ad hoc. They were, of course, not perfect,” Utiashvili said. “Many good people were fired; many people were brought in that we later arrested or fired. But that’s the only way you can do it.”

In less than a year, Saakashvili had dissolved the MSS, changing the face of Georgian law enforcement. The stage was set to recast the new MIA as distinct from its earlier incarnation. While the president maintained his vocal, high-profile support for the reforms, he devolved operational responsibility to the MIA itself. Each of the three post-2003 ministers enjoyed complete discretion, entrusting sweeping latitude to what was usually a group of

a half dozen or so deputy ministers and close advisers.

Utiashvili, having led his old MSS department into the new MIA, emerged as the ministry’s expert on internal reform and one of Minister Vano Merabishvili’s closest confidants. He was adamant in describing the need for a small task force with broad powers: “If you want to get things done, setting up the commissions and things like that is the best way to delay it and put the responsibilities on someone else. ... Now we cannot claim that there is some committee that is in our way or that somebody is not cooperating. If things go well, it is praises to us; if things go badly, it is our responsibility.” Eka Tkeshelashvili, a former deputy minister of internal affairs under Saakashvili and his national security adviser in 2009, concurred: “There was no need for super-big coordinating bodies which usually take too much time. ... You just don’t need to have that much coordination at that point.” The legislature, dominated by the ruling United National Movement, was content to cede any oversight or advisory role.

While Utiashvili and his colleagues were given broad discretion with little oversight, they stressed that their efforts would never have found sufficient traction without the president’s strong and consistent endorsement of their reforms.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

By dissolving the MSS, the Saakashvili government had struck at the heart of police politicization and had begun to address the service’s bloated payroll, making possible better pay for those officers who remained.

The flagship anti-corruption initiative, however, was the wholesale dismissal of Georgia’s Traffic Police, the service’s uniformed branch. The unit’s officers were notoriously corrupt in their dealings with the public. A senior police official recalled that until the end

of Shevardnadze's presidency in 2003, "you could not drive 10 kilometers without at least a few traffic policemen stopping your car and asking for a couple of dollars bribe."

The strategy was to strike at the most hardened of Shevardnadze-era institutions at its weakest and most visible point.

Saakashvili singled out the Traffic Police for several reasons. First, the force patrolled regular beats. While this allowed the uniformed patrolmen frequent opportunities to extort the average citizen, their petty corruption was not as complex a problem as the ongoing collaboration between some plainclothes detective units and the hardened criminals among whom they worked. The Traffic Police, Utiashvili recalled, "didn't have so much exposure with the criminals; they just had the exposure to the drivers ... That's why starting with the Traffic Police was the easy part. If you started with the unit that fights with organized crime, then you have a problem. So the Traffic Police was chosen exactly because it was easiest."

Second, because Traffic Police responsibilities rarely extended beyond minor road incidents, sacking the entire force would not jeopardize what few legitimate efforts were underway against serious criminality.

Last, the Traffic Police was also the most visible branch of the police; what happened to it would greatly influence popular opinion regarding the entire reform program. "The people saw the corrupt policemen standing on the road, dressed in their dirty uniform, usually weighing more than 100 kilos, unshaved, ugly-looking—that was the symbol. We had 15,000 guys like that," Utiashvili said. "What did we achieve by disbanding the Traffic Police? We changed the image. When you change the image, you get support for your reforms."

Outside observers added another reason: While foreign diplomats and aid workers were never exposed to the corruption of the public school system, they were nevertheless regularly

pulled over and arbitrarily fined along with other drivers in Georgia. Reforming the Traffic Police would be reported in the international media and conveyed back to the capitals of current and potential donor countries.

Saakashvili abolished the Traffic Police in July 2004, declaring the move his personal decision and assuming complete responsibility. He then pledged to replace the department with a new service, the Patrol Police, by the end of the next month. Although Georgia went without either a uniformed police service or any traffic regulation for an entire month, interviewees indicated that the traffic and petty crime situation was largely unaffected—in part because the situation was already so dismal but also because popular sentiment was still high in the wake of the regime change and bought the government a grace period of unique civic-mindedness.

According to Tkeshelashvili, the former deputy minister of interior, the Traffic Police unit was dismissed en masse because the MIA leadership believed that "if a person for a continuous period of time is engaged in misbehavior of that type, which is criminal by nature, you can't really bet that this person will improve much." In line with the guiding ethos of the government's broader libertarian reform program, the belief was that if an arm of government was not only failing at providing the public with services but actually exacerbating the problem, the situation could hardly worsen if that institution simply disappeared.

Forging the Patrol Police

The all-new Patrol Police department, which was to replace the disbanded Traffic Police, was meant to fulfill the functions of a standard uniformed police branch: Patrol a regular beat, maintain public order and regulate road traffic. Hiring for the new force began as soon as the Traffic Police had been dismissed in July 2004.

The Police Academy required all recruits in this first stage to hold university degrees, a demand that was later phased out; in 2009, applicants needed only a high school education. Just 15% of the first batch of recruits was veterans of the Shevardnadze-era police. Because the rest had no experience whatsoever in policing, training was critical to the success of this new force. Speed was of paramount importance, however, and initial recruits received just 10 days of instruction before being deployed on the streets with only a skeletal understanding of basic policing skills. An international adviser who was involved in the process described the unpreparedness of the new officers as “simply unbelievable.”

The pressure on Saakashvili to show immediate, drastic change was so great that he judged the gamble necessary. The sole consolation, again, was the prevailing belief that regardless of how the deployment went, things couldn't possibly end up worse than they already had been, and that the most important thing was to establish momentum. Fine-tuning would be left for a later day.

Lured by improved rates of pay and the prestige of serving at the vanguard of the government's anti-corruption “revolution,” applicants were plentiful. New hires had to pass interviews and physical tests. Before long, the initial two-week training program was extended to six weeks, and later to 12. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Open Society Justice Initiative assisted in course development, building on the manual that had been used to train the new Kosovo Police Service. The U.S. embassy, European Union's Rule of Law program, the British Council and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association similarly helped.

The MIA deployed the Patrol Police in August 2004 at a strength of nearly 2,500. The U.S. embassy assisted in creating the Patrol Police Command Center and establishing a

centralized 24-hour-a-day dispatching system. Pooling various donor funds, MIA then spent an initial US\$4.7 million on equipping the new force, including 130 Volkswagen Passat patrol cars (though the autonomous government of Ajaria had to settle for Skodas), 10 off-road Lada Nivas, handcuffs, batons, Israeli-made semi-automatic pistols, and uniforms.¹ Other equipment included non-lethal stun guns and rubber truncheons.

New uniforms and other gear were important aspects of the strategy of demonstrating a clear break with the Shevardnadze era. Georgian police uniforms had not changed much since the Soviet era and thus conveyed an image of continuity with the heavy-handed repression of the past. The Traffic Police had driven Soviet-made cars with Russian Cyrillic-lettered decals. “They did not have the [necessary] equipment,” Utiashvili said. “When they were going on operation and they had to arrest the criminals ... they needed to buy the gasoline with their own money. ... If their car would break down, they needed to repair it themselves.”

A pilot project deploying Patrol Police in the capital city, Tbilisi, was largely successful, encountering relatively minor but unforeseen complications. For instance, bilingual markings were put on new police cars after all-English wording sparked a brief nationalist outcry. The color of uniforms was changed to blue after the original black fatigues inspired an overly aggressive attitude in fresh recruits, who also tended to irritate residents with over-zealous use of their new megaphones. Fine-tuning aside, the Tbilisi pilot project was expanded and gradually phased in across the country along major highways and in cities.

Apart from equipment, members of the Patrol Police differed from their predecessors in one other major aspect: pay. “The official salary of the policeman was less than \$50” per month, Utiashvili recalled about the disbanded Traffic

Police. “But they were never really paid the salary because the salary would go into the pocket of the bosses, and all the other policemen were supposed to earn their own money.”

With the creation of the Patrol Police, the average monthly wage was increased to well over US\$200.² Payment of wages was taken out of the hands of superiors. “In 2004 I was still getting cash,” noted Utiashvili. “In the beginning of ’05 it was also cash. But as soon as the salary became a salary—a real amount, not a symbolic sum—it started to go into the bank accounts. So everybody is getting bank checks.” High-performing officers sometimes received cars or apartments in recognition of their service. Some officers saw their paychecks rise ten-fold or more.

One innovation that helped safeguard the reputation of the Patrol Police was that motorists now paid traffic fines at banks rather than to individual officers. The force’s public profile was also bolstered when the MIA began to produce its own television show, “Patrol,” that would run every day for 15 minutes during evening primetime, covering the crimes of the day. The end of each show would feature a public-service announcement on a topic such as where people should go to register their cars. The show was still airing in May 2009, though it had been moved to a late-night time slot.

Cutting back

The downsizing of the MSS, the dissolution of the Traffic Police and the elimination of other police units left thousands of police officers and security agents out of work. Although some estimates put the total at nearly 16,000, even MIA leaders did not know the exact number because neither the old MIA nor the MSS maintained a central personnel database. As one police officer put it, “since they didn’t pay them a salary, they didn’t give them cars, and they didn’t give them gasoline, why should they care how many there were?”

While international advisers expressed worry over what would become of this group of dismissed officers, the ministry was less concerned. Officers over the retirement age of 55, or with the requisite 20 years of service, were allowed to retire with their pensions. As for the rest, said Utiashvili, “We were giving them like two months’ salary and everyone saying to them ‘bye-bye.’”

Tkeshelashvili and other interviewees indicated that most of the dismissed officers were happy to go their own way with what effectively amounted to blanket amnesty for past offenses. The alternative was to remain and be subject to an internal investigation of their past conduct. “So it was more or less a silent deal” between the ministry and the dismissed, Tkeshelashvili said.

A far more lenient policy was applied to employees of the Criminal Police and other high-level investigative units. “We never did the same thing with the Criminal Police or, say, the anti-organized-crime police, because with these units you need to act differently—and we acted completely differently,” Utiashvili recalled.

Whereas the uniformed police were given amnesty only if they left, those in units with specialized skills were given amnesty even if they stayed. “We had to fire some of them that were well known because they were very corrupt or they were torturing people, [but] the others we basically told, ‘What happened, happened. Now we’re giving you much higher salaries, we’ll give you everything you need, and you have to work differently now.’ This was kind of a deal with the old [investigative] policemen,” Utiashvili said. As Tkeshelashvili explained, “They had a chance to stay, and then they had time to prove themselves.”

Nevertheless, the ministry cautiously set about purging the leadership of these investigative units. “We did a very slow reform, slowly replacing people from the top down,” Utiashvili said. With such units, “You always

have to start from the top down; otherwise it just doesn't work."

Dismissals were well timed in the context of a strong job market as Georgia's private-sector economy boomed from 2004 to 2008. It was not entirely unreasonable for leaders like Utiashvili to assume dismissed officers would have little trouble finding work in the private sector.

The only initiative resembling a reemployment program was an informal attempt to channel dismissed police into the Protection Police, a unique department within the MIA. The protection unit received no funding from the state budget but rather competed on the open market to provide security for government installations such as the Ministry of Culture's museums, private buildings and international assistance missions of the United Nations, the European Union, the OSCE, and other groups. Protection Police stood guard outside the facilities, wearing specially marked uniforms and driving distinct orange patrol cars.

Grudgingly acknowledged as something of an anachronism by MIA officials, the Protection Police survived the overall police restructuring mainly because, according to Utiashvili, it was one of the best places to employ the fired policemen. "If somebody was corrupt or not good enough for the police and had been fired from our team, well, you cannot be corrupt in the Protection Police," he said. "Who would pay you a bribe? For what?" Of the 12,000 or so members of the Protection Police in 2009, about half were former policemen.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

As a result of staffing cutbacks, by 2006 Georgia had one law-enforcement agent for every 214 citizens, compared with one for every 78 citizens prior to the reforms.³ The savings could be redistributed to meet some of the salary increases across the service. Yet far more money

was needed, especially in the initial years of 2004 and 2005.

Supplemental funding for police salaries came from the United Nations Development Programme and EU governments, as well as from a Soros Foundation fund that existed for a year after the 2003 regime change. The MIA leadership targeted wage increases at high-level police officials, individuals who could conceivably do the most damage if corrupted. "They started to pay supplements for top-level people, the top thousand or so," recalled Utiashvili. "When I started to work here, my salary was, whatever, like \$50 or something, and I was getting a supplement of \$900 from the fund."

According to officers who were on the force at the time, higher salaries meant police were less susceptible to corruption, partly because they had a living wage for the first time and partly because a respectable paycheck fostered an unprecedented sense of pride within the ranks. Appropriate wages also meant that individuals with higher qualifications would consider working for the service. Competitive pay was a crucial factor in Utiashvili's own decision to join up: "In my previous job I was earning almost, like, \$1,000, which was big money in Georgia at that time. So I would not have moved from a \$1,000 salary to a \$50 salary, right? Because it is just impossible to live." Nevertheless, while the fund covered Utiashvili's senior salary of \$1,000 a month through 2004, his deputy was still earning only \$40.

Subsequent improvements in the security environment helped to boost revenue collection and to lure foreign investment, and by 2006 the state budget had assumed all salary obligations. As one officer put it, "Money that would have gone into private pockets now started to come into the budget."

Aside from payroll increases, the police needed massive investment in infrastructure and

equipment. While Saakashvili continued to lobby hard for foreign assistance, his government coupled outside help with an independent, parallel track. The president and his cabinet set up a special vehicle, called the Law Enforcement Development Fund, to receive contributions from “patriotic businessmen” who wished to support their country’s reform efforts. Kutelia described the plan this way: “In 2003, when we came to power, the state budget was zero. ... Society was requesting the immediate kind of deliverable results in terms of the security environment, the criminal environment. So there was a necessity to do something urgently, and anything you do requires some financial support. So we decided to set up, temporarily, a fund that would be supported by Georgian compatriots abroad or anyone who would donate for the armed forces or law enforcement agencies.”

The inner workings of this fund were not transparent, leading to allegations that the fund was nothing more than a vehicle for shaking-down the business community. Kutelia, however, insisted that secrecy was necessary, because businessmen facing the country’s criminal extortion rackets could hardly be expected to support the reform effort if their contributions were made public. “It was a legitimate concern of theirs,” Kutelia said, “and of course we could not, just for transparency’s sake, sacrifice the lives of people. It was not institutionalized but it was a temporary arrangement. Those who donated, they had their pre-conditions; and these were quite legitimate demands.”

The fund also benefited from the new administration’s zero-tolerance campaign against corruption, which had been extended across the rest of the Shevardnadze-era state apparatus. “Everybody was corrupt; nobody had a salary,” recalled Utiashvili. “But you cannot arrest everybody.” While high-profile corruption was

prosecuted and several former ministers went to jail, a plea-bargaining system was put in place to deal with the problem at lower levels. “We introduced this plea-bargaining system,” recalled Utiashvili, “which means that, for example: You misappropriated a million dollars; the police detain you; you pay back the damage to the country that is already proven, but you don’t go to jail; you remain free. That’s what we decided. It was a delicate issue. ... Some of that money went to the national budget, and some of that went into this Law Enforcement Development Fund.”

Georgian officials recognized the potential problems created by such a fund. “All such fund supplements are temporary measures,” Utiashvili said. “As soon as you keep them longer than they’re supposed to be around, there is a problem.” As the Georgian economy improved and revenue collection increased during 2004 and 2005, the central budget met more and more of the MIA’s expenditures. By late 2006, the Law Enforcement Development Fund had been closed down.

ASSESSING RESULTS

By the end of 2006, the Saakashvili government had achieved significant results in a relatively short period of time.

Perhaps the most fundamental change the Saakashvili government made was to purge the police of its corrupt officers. However, as noted above, the MIA never established any formal reemployment program, trusting that those officers who had been laid off would find work in the then-booming private sector. The drawbacks of this became apparent in late 2008, when Georgia was hit by the global financial crisis and capital flight in the wake of the country’s August war with Russia. By May 2009, officials voiced regret that a structured program had not been put in place. When anti-Saakashvili protests shut down central Tbilisi in

spring 2009, police officers had little trouble picking out their dismissed colleagues among the irate crowds.

Saakashvili made the restructuring of the corrupt Traffic Police into the new Patrol Police the centerpiece of his reform agenda. However, putting the spotlight so squarely on the uniformed branch may have allowed Georgia to sidestep the more difficult task of rooting out corruption among the police's mid-level ranks and among more specialized plainclothes units in particular. Foreign observers familiar with the MIA reforms often cited money laundering and narcotics as two areas of criminal activity in which rates of seizures and numbers of cases brought to prosecution were still questionably low.

Training was another area in which the new MIA's record was less than perfect. MIA officials readily acknowledged the limitations of the barebones, two-week instruction new recruits received in the rush to train and field the new Patrol Police in 2004. This was, reformers stressed, something that could always be fixed at a later point. Even by the summer of 2009, however, the cadet-training course still was shorter than two months, far shorter than the six-month duration various international assessment teams had recommended as a bare minimum. More than five years after the start of the reforms, MIA officials continued to maintain that training had to take a back seat to the ministry's urgent staffing needs.

The problem of hastily inducted recruits was compounded by a lack of subsequent in-service training. This meant Police Academy graduates who had undergone expedited training courses climbed higher and higher on the managerial ladders as time went on, while their training remained rudimentary. MIA officials said they were relatively unconcerned by this, arguing that all promotions were contingent upon the successful completion of an unbiased evaluation at the academy, lasting about a week

and consisting of specialized knowledge tests and interviews to evaluate managerial skills. While this process was adhered to, the rigor of the actual vetting procedure was not entirely clear. One police commander, for example, admitted that every officer he sent to the academy for evaluation was speedily approved for promotion. In mid-2009, it remained to be seen whether the reformed MIA had in fact developed a new organizational culture that placed real value on training.

Although it is unsurprising that reformers were unable to reverse decades of police dysfunction during 2004-06 and immediately thereafter, the achievements of the Saakashvili government are striking on several fronts.

First, police reform completely changed daily life for the average person. In early 2004, citizens had nearly as much to fear from police as from criminals. In 2009, by contrast, one foreign adviser observed that it was more dangerous to walk down Paris' Champs-Elysees than Tbilisi's major thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue.

Second, the effort to establish a new uniformed branch that would operate with professionalism and probity was a success. By 2009, plainclothes detectives would often request uniformed Patrol Police to accompany them when they went to question people, knowing that the population trusted the Patrol Police more than any other branch of the police service.⁴ Even Georgia's political opposition, usually vocal critics of Saakashvili's policies, could do little but praise the new force.

Yet the best indication of the reform's overall success was the measurable shift in the police's reputation. The force had been among Georgia's most despised institutions in 2003. By 2009, however, the reformed MIA had undergone such a revolutionary change that it ranked as the third most popular after the Georgian Orthodox Church and the army, according to a poll conducted by the

International Republican Institute, an organization funded by the U.S. government.

REFLECTIONS

Georgia's experience with overhauling its police operations offers lessons for reformers attempting similar changes in other countries.

One cautionary lesson has to do with the question of sustainability. Issues such as training did not lend themselves to sweeping, immediate solutions. Checkered performance on such fronts has the potential, over the long run, to undermine the progress that has been made. If Georgia was admirably bold in initiating reforms, perhaps it was also haphazard in safeguarding their sustainability. Still, such concerns do not obscure the fact that Georgia, against great odds, achieved gains that are worthy of sustaining.

By seizing the reform moment, the nascent government sought to maximize its most powerful resource—popular support. With the speedy dissolution of the hated MSS, Mikheil Saakashvili was able to change both the face and the character of Georgian law enforcement. For the first time in recent memory, the speed of the government's response matched the urgency of the citizens' concerns. Thus began a cycle within which the effective and speedy

expenditure of political capital built popular support.

The success of the effort lay in its pacing. The scope, audacity, and speed of reform matched the fervor of the general population's disdain for the status quo. From the outset, an outraged public was never asked to subscribe to a detailed reform strategy spread across medium- and long-term performance indicators. Actions were immediate and decisive.

"You need the people to feel that now their life is changing," insisted Utiashvili, "that the old things, the corrupt skills, will no longer work, and you need to prove that. For the people and businesses and government officials to see that, you need to take some very visible steps." MIA officials repeatedly stressed the need to strike fast, be aware that mistakes will be made, and deal with complications as they arise. According to Utiashvili, reformers cannot be content to set their timeframe along "the two-year cycle of international needs assessments, strategy papers, and action plans."

In the final analysis, Georgia's experience reveals the immense change that is possible when reform is coupled with high-level political endorsement and a willingness to incur the occasional misstep so that momentum can be maintained.

¹ Das, Dilip K. (ed.) *World Police Encyclopedia* (Routledge, New York: 2006), p. 312.

² Kupatadze, Alexander, Giorgi Siradze, and Giorgi Mitagvaria. "Policing and police reform in Georgia" in Louise Shelly, Erik Scott, and Anthony Latta (eds.) *Organized Crime and Corruption in Georgia* (Routledge, New York: 2007), 93-110. p. 101.

³ Das, p. 312.

⁴ Darchiashvili, David. *Security Sector Reform in Georgia, 2004-2007* (Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi: 2008), p. 31.

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