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Saakashvili's Original Notion of 'Civilized'

By Paul Rimple

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On his New Year's Eve address to the nation, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said 2010 was "a serious turning point" for the country's politics as it "moved from the streets to the parliamentary chamber and TV studios." He added that politics "became more civilized" and was "based on dialogue."

In a sense, he was right. Some of the more sensible opposition leaders, like Irakli Alasania, have begun to act like politicians by defining their platforms and meeting with their constituents, while others continue to behave like imbeciles and have devolved into opposition against one another. Yet while politics may have become more "civilized," the police have not, and that's the stuff that gets noticed even when you think no one is looking.

Three days after Saakashvili's address, police aggressively broke up a hunger strike at a memorial for fallen Georgian soldiers where a dozen veterans of the 1992-93 Abkhazia conflict had been camping since Dec. 27. The veterans were protesting the 2011 budget abolition of social benefits and the closure of a special hospital where they were given free treatment.

U.S. Ambassador John Bass offered his displeasure in the reported police violence, saying, “that type of violence does not have a place in democratic societies,” while Georgian ombudsman Giorgi Tugushi and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association condemned the breakup as illegal.

The Interior Ministry said the protesters insulted police and refused to remove makeshift shelters, which was enough grounds to haul everybody in where each was subsequently fined the equivalent of $225 for petty hooliganism and disobeying police orders.

In November, the largest opposition rally of the year was all but ignored by the three main television broadcasters, Rustavi 2, Imedi and Georgian Public Broadcasting First Channel. None of these station thought that the Jan. 3 crackdown was worth covering, although GPB director Gia Chanturia said his station would have covered it if there had been any footage.

One witness to the violent dispersal managed to tape a policeman punching a female opposition protester in the face. The footage made the rounds on the Internet, and the policeman lost his job. What we don’t know is whether the Abkhaz war veterans, who are so venerated at the Heroes Square monument to the dead, will get anything while they’re alive.

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