

## **Alexandre Kukhianidze On Combating Corruption in Georgia**

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Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has undergone remarkable reforms aimed at fighting the culture of corruption that flourished under the country's first post-Soviet president, Eduard Shevardnadze. Dr. Alexandre Kukhianidze, Director of the Caucasus Office of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime, and Corruption Center (TraCCC), discussed how Georgia has largely succeeded in eradicating petty corruption, but must address problems related to elite corruption.

Dr. Kukhianidze began his remarks by noting Georgia's dramatic rise in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) over the past seven years. In 2003, Georgia ranked #124, which left it tied with Angola, Azerbaijan, and Cameroon and just ahead of Myanmar. In 2010, Georgia's CPI rank was #68, as compared to other former Soviet states like Armenia (#123), Belarus (#127), Azerbaijan (#134), and Russia (#154). Georgia's 2010 ranking groups it with countries like Italy and Brazil, while leaving it ahead of EU states such as Bulgaria and Romania.

Based on TraCCC research conducted from 2003 to 2006, Dr. Kukhianidze concluded that numerous government officials were involved in massive "pyramid" corruption schemes. There were two main reasons for the existence of corruption: 1) low official salaries and 2) top officials were actively inspiring corruption. While it had existed in Georgia before the fall of the Soviet Union, corruption became normalized following Shevardnadze's accession to Georgia's presidency. Due to the extent to which corruption had penetrated all spheres of Georgia's political life, analysts concluded that Georgia under Shevardnadze was in danger of becoming a failed state.

Before 2003 there was a near total absence of domestic political will to combat corruption, despite the fact that Shevardnadze was under constant pressure from the West to undertake reforms, due to the fact that Georgia was and is dependent on Western aid. Years of support from the West helped foster a vibrant civil society in Georgia, which played no small part in galvanizing ordinary Georgian citizens against Shevardnadze's regime.

On the heels of the flawed parliamentary election in November 2003, Georgian citizens decided that enough was enough and forced Shevardnadze out. Riding a wave of popular support for reform, Mikhail Saakashvili's government began undertaking the systemic cleaning deemed necessary for combating corruption in Georgia. Saakashvili's first major step in the fight against corruption was to fire the entire Georgian traffic police department in 2004. Widely viewed as the most corrupt group of officials, the traffic police firings set the tone for reform efforts. With the establishment of a patrol police, salaries were increased, there was open competition for jobs, efforts were taken to ensure a gender balance, and responsibilities were increased. As a result, the community-oriented patrol police now serve the people.

In addition to progress made with respect to the reformed police, the Saakashvili government has achieved success in significantly lessening corruption in Georgia's institutes of higher education. Previously, students were required to pay bribes to matriculate, pass exams, graduate, and for other services, which greatly limited the functioning of the country's higher education institutes. Reforms instituted by the Saakashvili government included close monitoring of admissions practices and curtailing of bribe payments during exams.

Dr. Kukhianidze also highlighted the lingering culture of corruption in Georgia's twin breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As compared to Ajaria, the former breakaway region that Saakashvili succeeded in reuniting with Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have remained focal points for crime and smuggling. With Georgian officials unwilling to establish border posts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia out of fear that the breakaway republics will immediately interpret such moves as part of an attempt to establish a new state border, criminal groups have stepped in to take advantage. Networks linking criminal groups with corrupt bureaucrats and law enforcement officials, Georgian guerillas, Russian peacekeepers, and destitute civilians ensure that illicit trade will continue to pose serious problems for Georgia's national security.

Yet, Georgia's success has largely been confined to petty corruption, while elite corruption remains relatively unchecked. According to Dr. Kukhianidze, government control of television outlets, the lack of an independent judiciary, and cleavages between the government and civil society have slowed the fight against elite corruption. Moreover, Georgia's progress towards greater democratization has slowed in recent years, which Dr. Kukhianidze highlights as one reason why elite corruption persists. While the present Georgian government is adept at state-building, infrastructure development, and reform, democratization appears not to be a high priority. Continued support from the West will ensure that Georgia continues to develop its democracy.

In an effort to sustain the progress made in combating corruption in the police and higher education, Dr. Kukhianidze is currently in the process of developing a master's degree program in security studies in Georgia that will focus on the connections between corruption, crime, and national security. It will build on the reformed Georgian universities and help communicate the lessons learned through Georgia's success in reducing corruption.