

Georgia Ecstatic at Bush Visit

Author: [Giorgy Kupatadze](#)

A euphoric reception for the US president in Tbilisi masks different interpretations of what his visit means.

The popular reception in Tbilisi for President George W Bush, the first American leader to visit Georgia, exceeded all expectations. A huge concert in the rain on a specially constructed stage in the old city evidently delighted the president. A crowd of more than 100,000 people on Freedom Square heard the speech praising Georgia as a “beacon of democracy” that was the centrepiece of his visit.

However, different people came away with different interpretations of Bush’s 19-hour visit to Georgia. The US president spoke mostly in general terms, using Georgia as an example of his broader geopolitical message about the spread of democracy. Supporters of Georgia president Mikheil Saakashvili were heartened by Bush’s unstinting praise for their leader. Other experts were disappointed that Bush had not delivered more detailed criticism to the Georgian leadership of some of its policies.

In his set-piece speech on Freedom Square on May 10, Bush made clear the central reason for his decision to visit Georgia, telling the crowd, “You are making many important contributions to freedom’s cause, but your most important contribution is your example.” He said democratic movements in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Iraq had been inspired by Georgia.

He was lavish with praise for Saakashvili, telling the crowd, “I am proud to stand beside a president who has shown such spirit, determination, and leadership in the cause of freedom.”

The only muted words of criticism came when he told a press conference, “The president [Saakashvili] recognises there’s a lot of work to be done to leave the foundations, institutional foundations in place, so that no one will ever be able to overturn democracy.”

“If anyone had any illusions about Bush making tough statements, they did not come to pass as there was no tough talking,” said Levan Berdzenishvili, a political analyst and member of parliament for the Republican Party. “I didn’t have any illusions. This visit was a success for Georgia even before it happened.”

On the key issue of the unresolved conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Bush repeated the formula that the United States supported the territorial integrity of Georgia but that the disputes had to be settled peacefully. However – in public at least – he stopped short of an explicit call on Georgia to refrain from provoking conflict with South Ossetia, where tensions remain high.

Bush said of his Georgian colleague at the press conference, “One of the things that I was most appreciative of is his full understanding of the need and the desire to settle these issues peacefully. And I’m confident, with good work and cooperation, we can solve them peacefully. He can solve them peacefully, with our help.”

Saakashvili interpreted this as a message of support, telling the crowd on Freedom Square, “Today the president of the USA has announced for the whole world to hear that Georgia will be united and the United States will defend its unity and integrity.

“We do not want war, we want peace within a single Georgia.”

Bush's visit was an epochal moment for many Georgians.

"I am not disappointed, but I was expecting that Bush would make more concrete declarations on the territorial integrity of Georgia and the withdrawal of Russian bases from here," said Gennady Gulia, a 49-year-old refugee from Abkhazia. "But the visit is important in itself and will definitely bring Georgia benefits."

The centre of Tbilisi was virtually paralysed by the visit, with Freedom Square, Rustaveli Avenue and other central streets closed to traffic. Roads had been repaired and buildings repainted all along the route of the presidential cortege.

Bush was welcomed with a performance by traditional Georgian dancers. They performed in national costumes, minus one important feature, the dagger or kinzhal. Even so the presidential bodyguard still had reason to be concerned. The presidents and their wives stayed 40 minutes at the concert instead of a planned 15 and Bush came out onto the stage several times to thank the dancers and even tried some dancing himself.

Crowds began gathering to hear the presidential speech on Freedom Square several hours in advance. At first everyone was meticulously checked by security and not allowed to bring in metal objects, flags with poles or even umbrellas. However, when a throng of several thousand people was pressed up against the American metal-detectors, the security services could not contain them and the crowd poured onto the square unchecked.

That meant that more than 100,000 people heard Bush's speech, most of them unchecked. But the Festival of Democracy and Freedom passed off mostly without a hitch apart from a failure in the sound system, which meant that the crowd sang the national anthem unaccompanied. It later turned out that a hand-grenade had been thrown near the stage but Georgian officials later said it was not live.

All Georgian ears keenly listened to what Bush say about their country's disputes with Russia. The US president, arriving from Moscow, told the press conference that he had received a commitment from President Putin to work to solve the issue.

Levan Berdzenishvili interpreted this as "President Bush has clearly given the message that the USA and the West do not consider serious a dispute over one year which Georgia and Russia are having in their negotiations over the withdrawal of bases".

David Gamkrelidze, leader of the New Rights party and the only leading member of the opposition to meet Bush, when he talked to parliamentarians, said that Bush had "expressed his readiness to act as mediator in Georgian-Russian relations".

"I had the impression that by saying this the president was fulfilling a request made by Vladimir Putin," said Gamkrelidze.

Georgians were heartened by Bush's strong commitment to Georgia joining NATO. Thanking Georgia for its support in the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, he said, "The president is very clear about his intentions to meet the obligations to join NATO. And, Mr President, we look forward to working with you to meet those obligations."

Mark Mullen, an American who has lived for the last eight years in Georgia and is now chairman of Transparency International Georgia, said he thought the visit had been a big boost for the country.

“The most obvious positive thing is that the president of the United States is more likely to take an interest in what happens here,” he said.

A potential downside, Mullen said, was that the visit might have provoked Russia, which will always take a closer interest in Georgia than the US. And he was also concerned that the visit might raise unreal expectations about what Washington could actually do for Georgia.

“There was a sense around of ‘President Bush, please help us!’ But ultimately everything that Georgia has to do needs to be done by the Georgian people. I hope this visit will not eclipse that,” he said.

By official estimates the Georgian authorities spent 400,000 lari (220,000 dollars) on welcoming Bush. The general verdict was that the government did not disgrace itself.

“It was just fantastic!” said Manana Kokhreidze, 42, who heard Bush on Freedom Square. “We were given the rare honour and the visit by the president of America shows that we are on the right road. When we were about to sign the national anthem and the loudspeakers failed and our choir sang the hymn unaccompanied, I wept.”

It took dozens of street-cleaners and vehicles to clear up the aftermath of the rally, but even they were in a good mood following the big visit.

“There’s a lot of work, but if guests like this come here, we are ready to work every day,” said cleaner Khailaz Kaloyan.

Giorgy Kupatadze is a correspondent with Black Sea Press news agency in Tbilisi.

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