

An Atlantic Council of Canada Roundtable with;

The Honourable Dimitri Shashkini

Minister of Education and Science of Georgia and
Coordinator of the Second Wave of Democratic Reforms

**‘The Second Wave of Democratic
Reforms in Georgia’**

Monday, March 22, 2010, Royal Canadian Military Institute

On March 22 the Royal Canadian Military Institute in association with the Atlantic Council of Canada hosted a presentation by the Honourable Dimitri Shashkini, Georgian Minister of Education and Science. As the Coordinator of Georgia’s Second Wave of Democratization, Mr. Shashkini provided valuable insight on Georgia’s landmark journey towards a healthy democracy. Since its 2003 “Rose Revolution” Georgia has made significant progress in supporting civil society, promoting human rights and the rule of law, and securing the conditions necessary for free and fair elections. Despite this significant progress, Mr. Shashkini was quick to assert that Georgia’s transition to consolidated democracy remains incomplete. In order to encourage steady progress towards this end, Mr. Shashkini has been assigned to oversee Georgia’s second round of democratic reforms. In detailing these reform initiatives, Mr. Shashkini emphasized the Government of Georgia’s commitment to strengthening the independence of Georgia’s judiciary, proceeding with electoral reforms aimed at ensuring fair and transparent elections, strengthening institutional guarantees for participation by opposition parties, and facilitating media pluralism. As the center piece of this wave of democratic reform, Georgia has also set out to draft a new constitution principled on the rule of law, the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, economic and social justice, and a clear separation of powers through a system of checks and balances.

According to Shashkini, such reforms are not merely by-products of international diplomatic pressure. In other words, Georgia’s democratic transition is more simply driven by its pursuit for membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While these initiatives are widely supported by the Georgian population and are considered top priorities on Georgia’s foreign policy agenda, the process of democratization is rooted in the will of the people. Mr. Shashkini proudly claimed that the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are in the blood of all Georgian people, making the process of democratization a natural step towards mature Georgian statehood.

As one might have expected, it did not take long for the conversation to focus on the proverbial elephant in the room: Russia. Commenting on the aftermath of the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, Mr. Shashkini emphasized that nearly a third of Georgia’s sovereign territory remained under Russian occupation – a clear impediment to economic growth and the consolidation of Georgian democracy. The threat from Russia, Mr. Shashkini argued, cannot be explained by Russia’s desire for territorial expansion: what could a large, resource-rich nation such as Russia realistically gain from annexing this small and resource devoid swath of land? Rather, the continued tension between Russia and Georgia is driven by ideology. Given its notable progress towards democratization, educational reform and recent economic growth, Georgia represents an ideological threat to Russia. Simply put, Georgia is a success story among former Soviet Republics that could fuel domestic unrest in Russia. Shashkini argued that Russians will witness Georgia’s development and begin to ask why they don’t have the freedoms and opportunities that Georgians enjoy. In order to avoid such domestic pressure, Moscow is encouraged to stall or derail Georgia’s pursuit of democracy, human rights and continued economic development. Despite the distinct security threats posed by Russia – whether based on ideology, geopolitics or security interests – Mr. Shashkini was emphatic in driving home his main point: the government of Georgia is fully committed to walk the long and difficult road to democracy.