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## U.S., Russia have much at stake in Georgian elections.(Knight Ridder Newspapers)

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TBILISI, Georgia \_ It may be just a decrepit little country in the Caucasus, but Georgia will attract some serious Russian and American attention when it holds its presidential elections Sunday.

Tbilisi city politician Mikhail Saakashvili has been a hero of the West ever since he grabbed a rose, led a storming of the parliament, and forced the resignation of corrupt President Eduard Shevardnadze in November. He's practically a shoo-in for president, and supporters say he'll help pull his homeland out of poverty and build a democratic, pro-American country.

But nothing is guaranteed in this unstable region, where electoral fraud, violence and political intrigue have made past elections practically a joke. Similar shenanigans, observers fear, could threaten the legitimacy of this election, too.

The outcome will shape the struggle between the United States and Russia for political and economic influence in the region \_ and perhaps prospects for peace in the region.

"If this place doesn't have (political) institutions to create stability, it could be a powder keg," said Mark Mullen, resident director of the National Democratic Institute in Georgia, which is funded by the U.S. Congress.

This rural former Soviet republic of about 5 million people once had one of the highest living standards of the Soviet Union. Its rich orchards, lush scenery and sub-tropical coastline made it the playground of the Soviet elite.

But Shevardnadze's post-Soviet regime practically bankrupted the country. It can't collect its taxes or guard its borders, and in winter the electricity may be on for only a few hours a day.

It can't even control sections of its country. Three autonomous areas \_ the Black Sea regions of Abkhazia and Adzharia and a northern sector known as South Ossetia \_ are thuggish fiefdoms whose rulers have no love of Tbilisi.

Still, Georgia has been a pro-Western force for the past decade, and America and its European allies are eager to see it succeed.

One reason is energy. The United States, anxious about the stability of Middle Eastern oil supplies, is backing an international consortium, led by British Petroleum, that is building a \$3.1 billion oil pipeline from the oil-rich Caspian Sea across Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea.

The other is Washington's influence in the region. Georgia has long been considered a strategic toehold in the Caucasus, supported with millions of dollars in U.S. aid and military training.

If it turns democratic, Georgia will encourage pro-Western forces in neighboring countries such as Azerbaijan and Armenia.

"It's a pretty darned convenient neighborhood to have a democratic government in," Mullen said.

Russia doesn't welcome U.S. encroachment on its turf.

Moscow wants to dominate the region's oil and gas supplies and views the BP consortium's pipeline as a threatening intrusion. Its nationalist politicians fumed as the United States set up antiterrorism bases in former Soviet republics in Central Asia that

border Afghanistan.

"Russians want to be influential here for the sake of national honor," said Ghia Nodia, chairman of The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development in Tbilisi.

(EDITORS: STORY CAN END HERE)

Meanwhile, Georgians remain suspicious of their northern Russian neighbor.

Russia controls Georgia's electricity and gas supplies, and it isn't above turning them off when it's miffed with Tbilisi. Despite Georgia's repeated denials, Moscow has blamed the country for allowing Chechen rebels to seek refuge \_ and has threatened pre-emptive strikes.

What really gets Georgians fuming is Russia's wooing of the three autonomous areas, which Moscow and many of their residents consider independent republics, and attempts to divide them from Tbilisi.

The effort has practically succeeded in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It dominates their economies and has gotten more than half the population to take Russian passports.

"Russia has occupied our territories," complained Tamaz Nadareishvili, a member of the Georgian Parliament.

Which is why all eyes are now on the autonomous province of Adzharia.

Its leader, Aslan Abashidze, is no friend of Saakashvili. And Abashidze has a history of rigging elections, independent observers say, and is in a position to undermine the legitimacy of Sunday's balloting.

If that happens, Caucasus expert Nodia said, "people will wonder, 'What the hell was (the revolution) all about? Why did we go to the streets?'"

And many election participants will turn into angry cynics.

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Georgia facts

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