

# GEORGIA FOUR YEARS AFTER THE ROSE REVOLUTION

*The fourth anniversary of the Rose Revolution was marked again by an outburst of civil protest, this time against the very government and president such demonstrations brought to power in November 2003. The author narrates the hardships of the transition process pointing to both successes and flaws of the current leadership. She calls for a free and fair conduct of the upcoming elections as well as the continued support of the Euro-Atlantic coalition, including the support of strong regional powers such as Turkey, so that Georgia may pass through the rocky road of transition and further consolidate itself as the beacon of democracy in the region.*

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The fourth anniversary of the Rose Revolution was marked with curious "déjà vu" on the major avenue of capital Tbilisi. On 2 November 2007, as aired live by leading western media, tens of thousands of people in front of the parliament building rallied peacefully, in a manner that Georgians have mastered through the last few years.<sup>1</sup> This "culture" of civic activism was perhaps learnt through bitter lessons of the early 1990s when civil war coupled with the bloody conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia separatist regions brought about misfortunate, loss of lives and a sluggish start of independent statehood; the country was doomed into uneasy years of troubled transition, poverty, crime, rampant corruption and stalemate.

It was exactly four years ago, in the aftermath of the 2 November 2003 fraudulent parliamentary elections<sup>2</sup> when masses of people marched on the street to protest the hardships that Shevardnadze's regime brought about or failed to address. The verdict was unanimous and clear: "Georgia without Shevardnadze!" as the very precondition and the only chance for economic progress and democratic development. The flawed elections turned out to be the last drop in people's long-trying patience which sparked popular revolt and served as an underlying cause of legitimacy for the bloodless coup – known as the Revolution of Roses.<sup>3</sup> This was propelled by the popular opposition trio of Mikheil Saakashvili leader of the National Movement, Nino Burdjanadze acting head of the parliament, and Zurab Zhvania, the leader of United Democrats together with the leading civil society organizations, dynamic youth movement "Kmara" (Georgian prototype of Serbian 'Otpor') and the only independent TV broadcaster with country-wide coverage, Rustavi 2.

The post revolutionary euphoria brought opposition anchor and popular leader Mikheil Saakashvili a landslide victory with over 90 percent of support in the January 2004 Presidential elections.<sup>4</sup> Constitutional changes were hastily adopted by the dysfunctional old parliament in early February 2004, which in fact generated the first discord between the young government and part of their political and civil supporters, *inter alia* designed a post of Prime Minister occupied by late Zurab Zhvania. The April 2004 Parliamentary elections won a conclusive majority to the National Movement and Democrats that entrusted chairmanship again to Mrs. Burdjanadze. The new governmental 'triumvirate' took over the difficult task and heavy responsibility of driving the country out of stagnation, launching progressive reforms and addressing enormous hopes and expectations. The inaugural speech of President Saakashvili in January 2004 set the ambitious goal of "transforming Georgia into a united, stable, democratic, independent and powerful state."<sup>5</sup>

External expectations were very high as well. The Rose Revolution was perceived as a fresh start for Georgia's democratic state-building and possibly a precedent-setting success model for the wider region. The following 'color revolutions', as they are usually referred to, in Ukraine and in Kyrgyzstan were viewed in the framework of a new wave of democratization throughout post-Soviet space, hoped by some and feared by others to have a domino effect in the neighborhood and beyond. The U.S. President George W. Bush, during his visit to Tbilisi

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<sup>1</sup> Around 100,000 people according to some sources.

<sup>2</sup> The results of the elections, largely contradicting to the preliminary results of the elections, exit polls and parallel vote tabulation, were rigged by Shevardnadze's regime for the benefit of ruling party: Ghia Nodia, *Civil Society Organizations and the "Rose Revolution"*, in Ghia Nodia, "Civil Society Development in Georgia: Achievements and Challenges", Policy Paper, Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, 2005, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Roses that the demonstrators carried when rallying on the streets and even storming the parliament to oust the old government, symbolized the non-violent nature of the change.

<sup>4</sup> The voter turnout marked slightly above 50%.

<sup>5</sup> Inaugural Speech by President Mikheil Saakashvili, 25 January 2004, [www.president.gov.ge](http://www.president.gov.ge)

on 10 May 2005, labeled Georgia as a “beacon of liberty for this region and the world” and expressed hopes that many would “have been inspired by your [Georgia's] example and take hope in your [Georgia's] success.” He also pledged to support the country in its “travel” down an uneasy path of democratic state-building.<sup>6</sup>

#### ***Four Years into the Revolution- Ebbs and Flows***

The era of dynamic changes succeeded over the long-lasting era of ‘stability’<sup>7</sup> of endemic crisis. The last few years were marked by a number of aggressive reforms and badly needed changes in several fronts, some yielding unarguably positive results. The major achievements, as often proudly advertised by the government and largely supported by the West, were observed in such areas as: fighting structural corruption, smuggling and crime; reforming the old Soviet-style educational system; reshuffling the police in a way that earned them confidence (totally non-existent previously); modernizing and increasing the qualifications of the army; shrinking the bureaucratic apparatus; providing relatively stable energy supply—largely deficient in previous years; repairing some major roads and other infrastructure, and launching rigorous economic reforms.

The latter entailed liberalization by lowering taxes and downsizing customs, initiating privatization, inviting foreign investments, boosting the devastated state budget, sharply improving macroeconomic index inasmuch as hitting an impressive 18<sup>th</sup> place in World Bank's 2007 annual survey on Doing Business rating (holding the 112<sup>th</sup> position just two years ago) and earning the repute of the most successful reformer country of the world by the World Bank assessment. All these, taking place in the background of progress in the realm of foreign policy such as withdrawal of Russian military basis, acquisition of Intensified Dialogue from NATO<sup>8</sup>, obtainment of a substantial share of assistance under the U.S. sponsored Millennium Challenge Program and so on, puzzled many foreign observers (and even some domestic) about the causes of the opposition-led events in early November Georgia.

With the November 2007 demonstrations, many rushed to question the validity of the democratic success-story for Georgia. Some speculated that the revolutionary democracy had failed in transforming into evolutionary democracy. Others asked whether Georgia was trapped in a vicious circle of revolutionary changes since early 1990s. The rest wondered whether this was a Russian-inspired provocation aiming a coup and massive destabilization to hamper the country's democratic progress as had been warned by the Georgian government and was reiterated in the aftermath of the demonstrations. Was this the result of inevitable difficulties in the transition to democracy, exaggerated expectations, or concrete government errors?

Temptations of drawing parallels between the November 2007 demonstrations and the Rose Revolution were rather high due to at least resemblance of some purely visual symbols—such as thousands of people waving hands, flags and slogans in rather organized and peaceful manner, including many of those faces who propelled the Revolution of Roses at its times, on the same spot and the same time of the year, passionate speeches of opposition leaders—eventually becoming more radical, and the only nation-wide broadcaster Imedi TV (meaning ‘hope’ in English) airing almost everything live as did the famous TV anchor of the 2003

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<sup>6</sup> President Addresses and Thanks Citizens in Tbilisi, Georgia, Office of the Press Secretary, 10 May 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050510-2.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Shevardnadze's favorite election slogan and actual priority.

<sup>8</sup> Approved on 21 September 2006.

events, Rustavi 2. Even one of the keywords somehow coincided – ‘parliamentary elections.’ Though a closer look suggests that the overall context, the ground-laying reasons as well as the end result of the demonstrations is rather different.

More specifically, unlike four years ago, fraudulence in elections was not a trigger for revolt, but elections were a part of the political aims. The 10 opposition-party coalition demanded the parliamentary elections be held at the time set by constitutional frames (i.e. Spring 2008 instead of Fall of the same year, as earmarked by constitutional amendments of 27 December 2006) and presented this slogan as a remedy to the diverse concerns of the protesters. The agreement of thousands to this call demonstrated the general fatigue from revolutions. The legislative majority had approved the new dates for parliamentary and presidential elections suggested by the President – thus prolonging the parliament's term in office by six to eight months.<sup>9</sup> Likewise the term of the Adjara Autonomous Republic government would be extended while Saakashvili's presidency would be cut by three to six months in order to provision all elections be run together.

The opposition, including the majority of those who joined the 10-party coalition later, condemned the decision as an attempt of "power usurpation" and a clearly "undemocratic precedent," devised to serve as nothing more than double-edged election tactics aiming, on the one hand, to use Saakashvili as a locomotive for his rating-loosing party in parliamentary elections<sup>10</sup> and, on the other, to disqualify Saakashvili's opponents under 35, specifically Irakli Okruashvili, from running for the presidency.<sup>11</sup> Certain disapproval was voiced also by the Venice Commission, the advisory body of the Council of Europe on constitutional matters, as well as a number of civil society representatives. However, the government had its own arguments. Notably, majority MP and the chair of parliamentary committee for legal affairs admitted that prolongation of parliament's term in office was “not a practice in developed democracies”, but that “those countries do not face the same problems that Georgia does.”<sup>12</sup>

More concretely, in making these changes, the government was motivated by the multiple external challenges that the country had to face within the next two critical years for its statehood. These were mounting pressures and expected provocations from Russia, potential manipulations with Georgia's troubled conflicts, especially with Kosovo independence debates blinking ahead, and the important decision on a possible upgrade for Georgia's cooperation with NATO - expected exactly in Spring 2008. These challenges, as explained by the government, would require Georgia's consolidated political efforts and societal unity; therefore, the shift of internal election dates, as an exception of the rule, was justified. The benefits of saving “time and energy”<sup>13</sup> by holding elections simultaneously was another argument.

Some may have deemed these motivations acceptable and convincing enough, however, the November 2007 event clearly demonstrated the unpopularity of the decision. Perhaps the constitutional amendment was one of the many clumsy steps of the government, some

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<sup>9</sup> Depending on the flexibility of new election season ranging from 1 October to 31 December 2008.

<sup>10</sup> As Kakha Kukava, MP, Conservative Party, has put it, see "Opponents See 'Risky Trend' Behind Constitutional Amendments", in *Civil Georgia*, UNAG online magazine, 2006-12-14 14:18:42, at [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge),

<sup>11</sup> As Davit Usupashvili, the chairman of the Republican Party stated by hinting on Irakli Okruashvili, the influential defense minister, who later became the anchor of November 2007 events, Nino Khutsidze and Giorgi Sepashvili, "Some See Foreign Factors Behind Saakashvili's Surprise Proposal", in *Civil Georgia*, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge).

<sup>12</sup> As Levan Bezhashvili, MP of the ruling National Movement and chair of the legal committee, quoted in "Opponents See 'Risky Trend' Behind Constitutional Amendments", in *Civil Georgia*, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge),

<sup>13</sup> Quoting President Saakashvili in Khutsidze, Sepashvili, *ibid.* on [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

avoidable and some not, which had cumulative effects powerful enough to stimulate massive opposition-lead street protests.

Few would be naive enough to expect that ‘Mission Impossible’ be accomplished and all those high hopes that gave way to a 96 percent presidential support of Saakashvili be met in this period of time. Moreover, the popular revolutionary origin of the government almost guaranteed individual hopes to outrun real possibilities and create a cluster of disappointed.

But there also grounded criticism in two dimensions:

One can argue that some unpleasant side-effects were unavoidable especially when launching fundamental reforms, but this could have been better conveyed to the society. As Prof. Alexander Rondeli, heading one of the leading Tbilisi-based think-tanks put it, “at least some in the government have forgotten that political processes should be very delicate, especially, when there are painful reforms going on, tens of thousands of people leave their jobs [as a result], people are in hardship”, arguing that some “painkillers” might have alleviated burdens of those difficult but necessary reforms.<sup>14</sup> Others question the adequacy of some reforms as such and view them more as experimental endeavors with unclear results launched by the small elite decision-making circle in government.

However, apart from ebbs and flows of reforms, the political opponents and a segment of civil society blames those in power for disregarding some major commitments which this government itself made as well as for failure to address (or adequately address) a number of basic expectations. For instance, they invoke with skepticism the impressive economic figures on paper that never reflected on the lives and well-being of people. Among other major concerns are also: Overpowering the law enforcement and power structures in general – resulting into basic human rights being abused by high ranking officials; tightening control over media; over-centralizing and over-consolidating power into executive, while keeping the legislative and judiciary largely inferior and subordinate to the executive. The insufficient progress towards a strong and independent judiciary stood in the way of the consolidation of rule of law and led to selective persecution based on political judgments. In addition, the government has been accused of disrespecting property rights and infringing individual freedom or dignity on several occasions.<sup>15</sup>

One can argue, that the lure of power consolidation could have been motivated by: 1) the necessity to push through integrated reforms, 2) the luxury of possessing very strong popular mandate, that was perhaps taken for granted and largely seen as fixed credit, 3) the initial deficiency of strong opposition and critical minded civil-society (as potential critics started off as either political coalition partners or supporters of the new government upon its coming to power).

But even when critical voices became stronger and more dramatic, the initial mode of practically unchallenged majority rule was continued – perhaps because the opposition seemed too weak or was not convincing. Dismissal of several independent-minded and influential personalities from the Cabinet of Ministers, including the odious chief of defense Irakli Okruashvili, and their replacement with more loyal authorities could be somewhat

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander Rondeli, the president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, interviewed by Dimitri Avaliani, *24 Saati* (24 Hours), Georgian Daily, No. 246 (1690), Monday, 29 October 2007 p.1; 4.

<sup>15</sup> See more in reports on situation of human rights in Georgia of Ombudsman of Georgia, from 2005 and 2006.

explained with a similar frame of mind. Okruashvili, being earlier praised by the President as his very best staff and stronghold at different positions in the government where most needed<sup>16</sup> and, interestingly enough, a target of opposition's harsh criticism, ended up being the one who gave a sparkle to political fevers of Fall 2007.

### **Chronicle of Political Fevers – Fall 2007**

The November turmoil took its start in late September after Irakli Okruashvili accused President Saakashvili and his close circle, including family members, with corruption, scandalous deals, and plotting murder of popular business tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, owning media holding Imedi – practically the only critical-minded broadcaster in Georgian electronic media space.<sup>17</sup> The former defense minister formed a political movement, invited a number of MPs, familiar media faces and others to launch a vigorous political campaign, however was jailed under charges of corruption within a few days. This triggered the first opposition-led massive street manifestation on 28 September 2007, with demands that ‘political prisoner’ Okruashvili be freed.

These events were followed by another surprise statement of former myrmidon of the President already in custody, retracing all accusations against Saakashvili and his government, and motivating allegations for Patarkatsishvili's assassination by the “desire of gaining political dividends.” Okruashvili was released soon on a bail of allegedly 10 million Georgian Lari (around 6 million USD) and accused for brickbat which allegedly played in hands of the ‘sponsor’ and ‘master’ of staged anti-governmental conspiracy, Badri Patarkatsishvili. After the release, Okruashvili addressed the nation from Germany via Imedi TV and reconfirmed his initial allegations.

This confrontation largely damaged Okruashvili's personal credibility and political chances and was finally concluded with his recent arrest and trial in Germany on Georgia-requested Interpol pursuit. But his badly-ended political intrusion encouraged the consolidation of nearly all opposition forces around the protests which quickly spread country-wide and won large numbers of supporters. The opposition had warned that the 2 November Tbilisi rallies would be the peak of overwhelming popular protests unless the government started dialogue with the opposition on a couple of decisions, topped by the major request of moving parliamentary elections back to Spring 2008 as a remedy to ensure more pluralistic representation in the parliament.

The government largely ignored and, at occasions, allegedly tried to obstruct the series of opposition-staged protests in different regions of the country throughout October 2007, perhaps due to not adequately appreciating the scale and significance of the increasing negative mood.

This indicates what is perhaps one of the government's major mistakes: Allowing its most powerful asset and source of legitimacy – direct contact with people and civil society at large – to be discarded. We could assume that by ignoring and showing intolerance towards criticism, the power stakeholders fueled more dissent. Therefore the turnout of tens of thousands caught them by surprise (and to a certain extent, the opposition as well). For a few days they ignored

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<sup>16</sup> Okruashvili served as general prosecutor, interior minister, defense minister until he was unwillingly moved to the position of the economic development minister which he immediately quitted.

<sup>17</sup> Being on the Interpol list on Russia's request, as his business partner and friend Boris Berezovski, Patarkatsishvili was believed to be one of the bankrollers of Rose Revolution and a sponsor of various charity initiatives in following years in the areas of recreation, culture, sports, etc.

*vox populi* in front of legislative building. This in turn, added more fuel to the tensions, produced more radical slogans, and made the state of affairs vulnerable to dangerous and unwanted manipulations.

Yet, the clear governmental response arrived on 7 November, when in fact the number of protestors started to decrease substantially. When in the morning police attempted to sweep away around a dozen on hunger strike and a small group of demonstrators from the steps of the parliament building, many more people gathered towards the afternoon in protest of the forced disperse. However, police backed up with special units in black uniforms and masks launched a heavy-handed crackdown on protestors, beating the civilians, using water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets allegedly to open the major road. The demonstration, which moved a few kilometers away from parliament, was chased and retaliated in the same way.

The day culminated with riot police raiding Imedi TV, which had been handed to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation a few weeks ago, putting it off air while transmitting in live, (together with other the other independent Tbilisi-wide TV station Kavkasia),<sup>18</sup> abusing journalists, smashing the equipment and dispersing again a group of Imedi TV supporters gathered spontaneously in front of the premises of the television channel. Perhaps, the heaviest day in Georgia's post-revolutionary history was wrapped up without casualties, but with several serious injures, and around 508 people seeking medical assistance. Among the people beaten were some opposition leaders<sup>19</sup> and even the public defender of Georgia, who was observing the developments on the spot. Very late at night the Prime Minister declared a country-wide state of emergency, restricting freedom of assembly and media news services for 15 days, except that of the Public Broadcaster. The frustrations were high internally and the international outcry very critical.

The next day the government made statements in attempt to justify the use of force and emergency rule. President Saakashvili stated: "What happened yesterday [7 November] was not our choice. I would like to stress that this was the only appropriate answer to the plot against Georgia and Georgian democracy, an attempt to undermine constitutional order. These were steps taken against democratic order in Georgia. I want all of us to realize that it was not the incumbent authorities that we protected yesterday, but Georgia's democracy, society, and statehood."<sup>20</sup>

Imedi TV was accused of being instrumental in Russian-orchestrated coup scenario by creating 'immediate threat' to state security by promoting popular unrest- including the statement of Patarkatsishvili on the evening of 7 November pledging to place all his financial resources in the effort against the current regime.

The spread of the special documentary prepared by the general prosecutor's office and several private phone conversation records of politicians, journalists, etc. by the public broadcaster during state of emergency was an attempt to collect evidence of a Russian conspiracy, where oligarch Patarkatsishvili was a key figure and some opposition leader suspected in cooperation with Russian special services. Several of Patarkatsishvili's business assets in

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<sup>18</sup> Imedi TV was deprived license for three months by court decision a few days after, though the reopening was negotiated successfully under immense internal and external pressure.

<sup>19</sup> See Human Rights Watch, Georgia: Riot Police Violently Disperse Peaceful Protesters, (New York, 8 November 2007), <http://hrw.org>

<sup>20</sup> President Saakashvili addresses to the nation during state of emergency, proposes snap presidential election for 5 January 2008 on 08 November 2007 / 21:31 at [www.president.gov.ge](http://www.president.gov.ge).

Georgia were raided in the aftermath while court ruled three months license-suspension for Imedi TV and froze its assets.

While the credibility of allegations that opposition leaders were in liaison with Russian special agents were questionable, it is less doubtful that there are Russian-vested interests and they play a role in Georgia's instability. One would need to have too short a memory to dismiss numerous pressures or provocations staged by Russia since Georgia regained independence and especially during past few years.

Georgia's resistance against Russian sphere of influence and its determination for closer Euro-Atlantic relations makes its Northern neighbor nervous and angry, therefore eager to provoke instabilities, often using Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a stage ground. While holding a tight grip on exclusive 'peacekeeping' mandate, illegally granting Russian citizenship to the population of separatist enclaves, making a good business out of it and completely disregarding Georgia's *de jure* omnipotence as well as CIS-imposed restrictions over Abkhazia, Russia now blackmails the world and especially Georgia by threatening to give further support to the separatist movements of Ossetia and Abkhazia in return for Kosovo independence. Boris Grizlov, the ex-speaker of the Russian Duma and the leader of Party "United Russia" goes as far as to vocally consider recognition of Georgia's conflict zones as independent or part of Russia at the very first conference after winning December 2007 Parliamentary elections. There are many more 'punitive measures' to be listed, such as cutting off energy supplies, direct transport connections, financial flows and even postal communication; imposing heavy visa restrictions; closing markets for major import goods from Georgia; discriminating, chasing and deporting masses of ethnic Georgians from Russia; and finally, violating Georgian airspace and even dropping a couple of missiles occasionally, as warning or reminder of Russian muscle-power.<sup>21</sup> On such a background one does not need much skill to be able to convince the Georgian public that Russia would either create or exploit unrest and instability in Georgia.

On the other hand, the forcible measures used by the Georgian government to neutralize "immediate danger" as announced later, played inasmuch into the hands of Russia or any other ill-wisher of the country as alleged attempts of destabilization. Georgia's democratic image suffered a lot and Euro-Atlantic prospects received a blow. The 7 November government-sponsored actions were met with criticism from NATO<sup>22</sup> and EU officials, calling the government to stick to its commitments.<sup>23</sup>

The leading international editorials were even harsher, straightforwardly questioning the viability and prospects of democracy in Georgia. Russian media coverage sharply verdicted the Rose Revolution and democratic endeavors as a failure. The question about the "inevitability" of use of force therefore remains largely debated. Moreover, following steps of

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<sup>21</sup> On 6 August, 2007 a Russian aircraft violating the airspace of Georgia dropped a Russian-designed KH-58 anti-radar air to surface missile in Tsitelubani, close to South Ossetia region, later confirmed by the Independent Inter-Governmental Expert Group (IIEG-2), likewise for instance, 11 March 2007 bombardment of Kodori Gorge, upper Abkhazia, by helicopters intruding from Russia. "Statement of the Permanent Mission of Georgia to the OSCE regarding the Fact of Violation of Georgian Airspace on 6 August 2007" at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, [www.mfa.gov.ge](http://www.mfa.gov.ge).

<sup>22</sup> NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated on 8 November that NATO, "following closely and with concern the events in Georgia", deemed Emergency Rule and the restrictions over media as matters of "particular concern and not in line with Euro-Atlantic values" News block at The Georgian Times, online outlet of English language Georgian newspaper, [www.geotimes.ge](http://www.geotimes.ge)

<sup>23</sup> The resolution of the European Parliament issued on 29 November called on Georgian authorities to "respect the principles of freedom of expression, including freedom of assembly and freedom of media".

the president, clearly aimed at discharging the crisis, addressing major concerns voiced by public protests, attempting to recover internal and international standing, reinforce this question even more.

### ***Back on Track – Elections as a Remedy?***

Saakashvili called for snap Presidential elections for 5 January 2008 by that cutting his term in office with more than one year in expectation of renewed "clear mandate" for second term. He also pledged to hold simultaneously referendum on the date of holding parliamentary elections and invited part of (more moderate) opposition leaders for long-sought dialogue under Burdjanadze's chairmanship, resulting in a number of compromise decisions on election code amendments and release of opposition-labeled "political prisoners." The government also lifted 10 day-long emergency rule (earlier than announced initially) as well as under immense internal and external pressures allowed crucial decision on reopening Imedi TV, which is still viewed by the ruling power as a major challenge. Moreover, Saakashvili refreshed the government by inviting a new Prime Minister- a successful businessmen and owner of a large Bank- with the new and ambitious program which shifts policy trends more towards a social dimension, while maintaining the fundamental direction. He did not forget to vow for more changes in the Cabinet upon being reelected. Saakashvili stepped down on 25 November to launch vigorous election campaign, encompassing television addresses, video clips, direct meetings with people countrywide, etc. largely refitting his Rose Revolutionary image. All these is supported by multitude of some ad hoc and some, as argued by the government, earlier planned (but nicely coinciding) social programs all launched simultaneously within few recent days and addressing all before-disregarded, not adequately treated and most vulnerable layers of society. Curiously enough, these programs seem to be tailored in a way that somehow reflects nearly all those aspects of popular discontent that were voiced in preceding rallies.<sup>24</sup>

Most importantly, the political opponents who have been in a way *zeitnoted* by the announcement of early presidential elections because of a lack of a single charismatic leader mutually acceptable for rather diverse parties in coalition still approved the newly set rules of game. The opposition leaders considered it as a post-factum victory of 'people power' and their efforts as well as best possible face-saving solution for the country and perhaps Saakashvili himself under given circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

In due course the major oppositional concerns, coinciding with that of western community, were related to ensuring transparent and equal campaigning opportunities, out ruling any political repressions against opposition and their supporters which, as they pledge, still took place, fully restoring freedom of media, provisioning for fair and free election procedures and naturally, carrying out the elections as a litmus test for democracy on the day itself.

However, the processes being brought back to constitutional frames with numerous candidates now bidding for presidency, motivates to question the adequacy of rather premature and exaggerated conclusions on the failures of post-revolutionary democracy in Georgia.

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<sup>24</sup> Among those recently started, temporary employment programs enrolling hundred thousand unemployed, increasing pensions, salaries of teachers, announcing large-scale amnesty, subsidizing socially vulnerable with commodity vouchers, legalizing temporary public owned shelters for IDPs as private property, gifting considerable one-off cash loaf/assistance to every new-born baby of socially vulnerable families, etc. involving largely the business and cultural circles in election propaganda.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Recedes as Election Season Begins to Unfold, *Civil Georgia*, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge).

## ***Georgia's Democratic Image – “Damage Assessment”***

The whole circle of maturing crisis in fall 2007 ending up with forcible dispersion, cost a lot in terms of damaging Georgia's hard-earned repute of emerging lighthouse of democracy. Despite having managed the crisis for the moment, this damage is still there. As argued above, the November 7<sup>th</sup> events may constitute the largest portion of the damage. One can therefore assume that if a portion of those compromise decisions which the government made after 7 November were done a few days earlier, the country might have well circumvented blemishes to its good image that now cost many more efforts to recover. The responsible authorities, including the newly appointed Prime Minister, who paid his first official visit to Brussels recently, already started out the mission of diplomatic troubleshooting.

Fairly enough, when the crisis eased the criticism declined and the country got conditional commitment of continued western support for its crucial Euro-Atlantic aspiration. As it was voiced in the statement of Peter Semneby, the EU special envoy: “...if presidential elections are carried out successfully, there should not be any lasting damage to these [Georgia-EU] relations.”<sup>26</sup> The same goes true for NATO, the U.S. and individual partnerships with western countries.

However, when talking about the image faults, there is another perhaps even more substantial question on how much the real democratic capacity of Georgia was challenged if at all *vis-a-vis* its image. As Vladimir Socor, a senior fellow of the Jamestown Foundation in Washington pointed out<sup>27</sup> Georgia's standing “suffered a lot lately for wrong reasons.” He is among those, who deem both factors: 1) The attributed image as of lighthouse or beacon of Democracy and 2) The harsh criticism and skepticism following the November 2007 events superficial and unjust. First was overburdening in terms of attached expectations for ‘miracles’ and second over-exaggerated in terms of failing to see those ‘miracles’ happen. Behind western media advertised “catchy” titles on Georgia, Socor thinks one fails to see "vulnerable and struggling" democracy challenged by a variety of internal and external factors which attempts to reach its fully-fledged state of development. Accordingly, he believes more appreciation should be given to country's realistic endeavors.

Those who might share this vision could trace to incisive observation of Alexis de Tocqueville which he has done at its times for America's young democracy – “closer the political system comes to fulfilling the goal the more it appears to fail when it has not fully reached this goal.”<sup>28</sup> And this is all about demanding too much when uneasy start has been taken. Here comes, also the Ukrainian experience of post-revolutionary political crisis as possible live illustration for complexity of post-revolutionary transition towards pluralism and institution-building. The spectacular splinters and regroupings in fragile orange coalition accompanied by familiarized street rallies have been solved by 30 September 2007 parliamentary elections, which brought about curious remarriage of the old revolutionary friends ending up in coalition with their revolutionary opponent. This story, despite having some country-specific origins, still may resonate Georgia's more recent experience with its own peculiarities.

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<sup>26</sup> *Civil Georgia*, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

<sup>27</sup> Lecture at the Ilia Chavchavadze University on 2 December 2007 in Tbilisi.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Magstadt, interpreting Alexis de Tocqueville's expression in Democracy in America (1831). Thomas Magstadt, “Politics by Civil Means”, in Magstadt, T., *Understanding Politics: Ideas, Institutions, and Issues*, Part III, Wadsworth Pub., 2005, p. 408

Nevertheless, whereas inflated expectations might gloom the mirror reflection of reality, they can hardly secure against or justify concrete errors in the art of the possible. The political fevers of fall unveiled many short fallings that Georgia still has to address on the way to a stable democracy, and furthermore it might have helped in a certain way to realize the priorities of the homework to be done. The pending elections, as vowed by Georgian political rulers and benchmarked by a number of international organizations as a test for Georgia's democracy, are still ahead. Some 400 OSCE observers and many more of specialized local and international organizations will be there to follow the process. Moreover, the pending parliamentary elections could be even more important in terms of instituting pluralism and power balance. The free and fair conduct of those elections, whatever noisy the process or unexpected the results could be, are the nearest opportunity for Georgia to convincingly reassure country's democratic commitment.

When adequacy of concrete actions by concrete political forces, including those in power or outside, can be criticized and argued, the responsibilities for all deeds or misdeeds have concrete addresses. Whereas, the people are given a legitimate right and importantly, the opportunity to fairly exercise this right, they can make their judgment and actualize it via voting, it means that major democratic milestone is secured. Therefore, it is unfair, not to say ungrounded, to slam the democratic-abilities and democratic prospects of the country as such, which has lately been the case on several occasions been a case lately several times.

The concluding section will shortly discuss what the viability of Georgia's democracy steams from and why it is important to safeguard and support respective course of development at this times.

### ***Safeguarding Democracy in Georgia: Why and How?***

I suggest that vitality of democracy in Georgia shall be measured more in the prism of preparedness, commitment and plausibility rather than singled out events or decisions during its uneasy democratization process. There are several factors that shall be capitalized and considered when supporting the transition process.

First of all, the democratic commitment of the country does not rest merely on particular political forces but on widely shared public consent. The Euro-Atlantic aspiration is commonly understood not only as a badly-needed security framework to guarantee independence and development but an established value-system which the country must target to synchronize with. On 12 March 2007 all political parties represented in the Parliament (and some outside it) unanimously adopted the Memorandum underscoring commitment to NATO membership and its standards. The referendum on this issue will be carried out on January 5<sup>th</sup> together with the presidential election which will provide official reference to the results demonstrated already by multiple opinion polls that show nearly unprecedented popular support to the idea. This may be conditioned, in turn, by several factors, among those: modern security challenges steaming from Russia, historical premises and European self-identification, short-lived experience of European state-building (1917-1921) interrupted by Soviet empire, negative memory of Soviet rule, etc. all encouraging the idea and practice of democracy, often interchangeably understood with Euro-Atlantic integration, as the only possible and successful way of development.

This is an important internal resource, as strong as it is now despite Russia's above mentioned 'offshoots,' that shall be utilized for the good of the country's democratic development. In this

realm, the support of European partners and the U.S. both bilaterally as well as via international organizations, especially the EU and NATO, is of tremendous importance.

Secondly, popular backing of democratic development is not only people's desire and commitment, but a result of maturity and preparedness. I propose to view the linkage between the Rose Revolution and November 2007 events in the light of popular fabric, leaving aside some alleged political scenarios. More specifically, the 2003 bloodless revolution was a genuine victory of the people, fighting for their chance of progress and prosperity. The display of the 'power of people' said much about the immense progress of civil society, which proved capable of watching over and defending already attained achievements for the sake of further progress. The great share of discontent which brought people back to the street four years later, along with some specific social, economic or political concerns, was on feelings (whether realistic, inflated or manipulated) of hardly-fought and well-deserved democratic values. The strong mood of protest against all actions or statements that somewhat deviate from what is widely believed as democratic, is perhaps a positive factor in terms of cementing an irreversible course of democracy. Therefore, it is much more relevant to see the popular motive of November 2007 street rallies as willingness to defend assets won by the revolution in 2003, rather than another revolution.

Thirdly, Georgia, a strategically important Eurasian transport and energy corridor, is a conduit of gas and oil, from Caspian to Turkey and further on to Europe. This encompasses the three major projects two of which are operational already: 1) Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Pipeline running from Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia (with a capacity of about 1 million barrels a day), 2) South Caucasus Gas Pipeline (SCP) connecting the Shah Deniz field in Azerbaijan to the Turkish-Georgian border (assumed to export 233 billion cubic feet a year), and 3) Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars Railway which will start in Azerbaijan, straddle Georgia and run to Turkey and there connect to the routes of different European destinations. This grand regional project, to be completed in 2010, was recently inaugurated by the three presidents who convened in Georgia on 21 November 2007 and stressed its "historic importance."

President Saakashvili added that this was a "geopolitical revolution"<sup>29</sup> in terms of physically connecting the region with Europe and having a huge economic potential in shipping goods from Kazakhstan and even China. Markedly, the railway will run through Georgia's Armenian populated Samtskhe-Javakheti region, and despite strong Armenian resentment to its construction, the benefits of the project, as noted by the presidents, will help regional cooperation and security at large.

The capacity to lessen Western energy dependence on Russia and the Middle East together with its increasing role as an east-west trade and security corridor raises the overall strategic importance of the region as well as the countries' individually. Therefore, security and stability of the area shall be viewed as a significant payoff for the U.S. and European interests. These goals can be attained by successful democracy-building and economic progress that in turn represent the only feasible insurance against multiple challenges embedded in the complexity of the region. Turkey's role as a NATO member and a powerful regional actor is of crucial importance, as demonstrated over the passed few years through serving as a good neighbor, important economic, political and strategic partner, and large contributor to many areas of the country's development.

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<sup>29</sup> "Azeri, Georgian, Turkish Leaders Speak on 'Historic' Rail Link", *Civil Georgia*, 13:59:29, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

Finally, political implications of Georgia's democratic development shall be viewed in the framework of the South Caucasus and beyond. For the last few years, Georgia was believed to be a trendsetter in the region and to a large extent still remains so with its most dynamic reform pace and ambitious Euro-Atlantic integration agenda. Hence, the processes during and after the Rose Revolution were closely and prudently observed by immediate neighbors and others throughout the post-Soviet neighborhood. The role of prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration is also critical and closely followed by neighboring areas.

It is true that due to diverging foreign and security vectors<sup>30</sup> and internal cleavages,<sup>31</sup> the South Caucasus failed to integrate as a geopolitical region. The absence of political alternatives affected the region's common economic and strategic outfit as an entity. Yet, shared geographic and strategic location, post-Soviet heritage, many more internal links and rigorous regional energy and transport projects, largely link the three countries to each other, especially in the international eye. Whereas the European institutions and NATO have somewhat differentiated individual partnership schemes with each country, the wider future-oriented perspective suggests to view all three sitting 'in one boat', especially in the case of the EU. Whereas contemporary modalities of regional interactions burdened with divergent dynamism of transition largely question the aptness of such approach, one can hardly argue that developments in each country have implications for the others. Moreover, sustainable security and stability of the region is much needed by every constituent of it, and this can be ensured only if certain –mutually acceptable– 'modus vivendi' is found. This in turn will either require as precondition or produce as consequence more or less comparable development patterns of the countries. Therefore, it would be beneficial to have regional locomotive(s) for democracy building, for economic development, for Euro-Atlantic integration, (not necessarily single best-performing country in all the directions) for the sake of the common regional good.

Accordingly, the vigorously begun democratic breakthrough four years ago in Georgia, running its ebbs and flows since then, needs to be supported and safeguarded for ends beyond only Georgia. Certainly, the ground work needs to be done by the country as the first and direct recipients of the results will be the people of this country. However, a helping hand and assistance in pinpointing positive and negative trends would immensely help in the struggle against the arrogant finger-pointing of ill-wishers.

The series of events since the Rose Revolution in Georgia perhaps makes us realize and keep in mind that beyond figurative visions of either 'blooming roses' or 'growing thorns' there is in fact a rather difficult process of transition towards sustainable democracy beseeching external support until a stage where already strong institutions will internally safeguard democracy from any major twists.

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<sup>30</sup> Armenia being largely pro-Russian and in cold conflict with Turkey; Azerbaijan closely linked to Turkey and mostly balancing Western and Russian dimensions somewhat influenced by oil politics; Georgia with its determined Euro-Atlantic direction, enjoying good relations with most of the neighbors, especially Turkey and Azerbaijan and suffering very bad relations with Russia.

<sup>31</sup> Such as Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia or Russian backed territorial conflicts in Georgia.