

NATION-BUILDING

**DILEMMA OF
THE GEORGIAN ELECTIONS:
POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OR
A SLIDE TOWARD
NON-LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

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For a long time now elections in Georgia have been a source of political crises rather than a mechanism of democratic power change. In recent Georgian history, in fact during the entire period of its independence, the government in power has never been changed through elections. The only exception so far were the very first multiparty parliamentary elections of 28 October, 1990 when the national political force, The Round Table—Free Georgia, headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia replaced the ruling Communist Party. Later President Gamsakhurdia was overthrown. For some time after the regime change the ruling party led by Eduard Shevardnadze won all the successive elections until he, in turn, was removed from power by the revolution of 2003. After that

the republic's election tradition underwent certain changes predated by the political crisis of the fall of 2007, which reached its height on 7 November when the demonstration of the opposition forces was dissipated and a state of emergency declared. The West insisted on a pre-term presidential election being held on 5 January, 2008 followed by parliamentary elections on 21 May. The elections did not replace the leadership, however they prompted those in power to bring new people into the upper echelons and carry out partial election reform. On the other hand, these elections revealed with unprecedented clarity the degree to which the republic's political system had been transformed and its trend toward non-liberal democracy.

New Political Reality and End of Revolution

The Georgian expert community has long agreed that the revolution of 2003 “has been going on far too long.” For some time the political system continued functioning on the “revolutionary fuel;” today it has been exhausted. The country is facing new political challenges. Only elections could have defused the tension; on the other hand, they could have served as a catalyst for a new revolution, which both society and the political elite were expecting. In the years of independence Georgia acquired a political tradition: non-constitutional regime change by the forces dissatisfied with the election results. It was for this reason and in the absence of a fully developed democratic election system that would lead to a legal power change that on 7 November, 2007 the opposition insisted on the parliamentary elections being shifted from the date scheduled for the fall of 2007 to the summer 2008. Its leaders hoped that by the summer they would be prepared to overthrow the government with the help of the crowd. The opposition went even further: when the date of the presidential election was announced its leaders threatened to stir up a massive uprising if the results were falsified. Significantly, having agreed to a pre-term presidential election Mikhail Saakashvili, as the incumbent, cut down his term by six months. The election was special in many respects: for the first time in the history of independence there were several real political contenders (even though the election system itself was not liberalized). Before that both Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze ran against people with no real political clout, some of them could be described as comical figures. No wonder that practically all the previous presidential elections brought triumph to the ruling regime. The first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose party was in the majority in the republic’s legislature, achieved a stunning victory. Eduard Shevardnadze won with less spectacular results. This political tradition was born on 26 May, 1991, the day of first presidential election in independent Georgia.

Eduard Shevardnadze, former First Secretary of the C.C. Communist Party of Georgia, never eclipsed the impressive victory of former dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia even though his retinue (some of them later staged the revolution that removed Shevardnadze from power) spared no effort. At the 2004 election (the first after the Rose Revolution) Mikhail Saakashvili had no real rivals and won with 96.27 percent of the votes. Gamsakhurdia’s record became history. This was how the presidential race unfolded in Georgia:

26 May, 1991

Total number of voters: 3,550,371

Turnout at the polls: 2,967,744 (83.59 percent)

1. Zviad Gamsakhurdia	—86.52 percent
2. Irakly Shengelaia	—0.85 percent
3. Jemal Mikeladze	—1.65 percent
4. Valerian Advadze	—7.59 percent
5. Tamaz Kvanchantiradze	—0.28 percent
6. Nodar Natadze	—1.17 percent

5 November, 1995

Total number of voters: 3,106,557

Turnout at the polls: 2,139,369 (68.90 percent)

1. Roin Liparteliani	—0.37 percent
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2. Akakii Bakradze	—1.47 percent
3. Jumber Patiashvili	—19.37 percent
4. Panteleimon Giorgadze	—0.50 percent
5. Eduard Shevardnadze	—74.32 percent
6. Kartlos Garibashvili	—0.47 percent

9 April, 2000

Total number of voters: 3,088,925

Turnout at the polls: 2,343,176 (76 percent)

1. Eduard Shevardnadze	—79.8 percent
2. Avtandil Djoglidze	—0.25 percent
3. Vazha Zhgenti	—0.14 percent
4. Tengiz Asanidze	—0.12 percent
5. Kartlos Garibashvili	—0.34 percent
6. Jumber Patiashvili	—16.66 percent

4 January, 2004

Total number of voters: 2,231,986

Turnout at the polls: 1,963,556 (87.97 percent)

1. Roin Liparteliani	—0.53 percent
2. Kartlos Garibashvili	—0.28 percent
3. Zurab Kelekhsashvili	—0.09 percent
4. Zaza Sikharulidze	—0.03 percent
5. Temur Shashiashvili	—2.47 percent
6. Mikhail Saakashvili	—96.27 percent¹

The 2008 election contradicted the Georgian political tradition to a certain extent. First, it was held at the same time as two referendums: one to decide the date of the next parliamentary elections (the disagreement over which stirred up political unrest) and the other on Georgia's membership in NATO. Their results combined in the most interesting way with the results of the presidential race, in which seven real contenders ran:

Total number of voters: 3,527,964

Turnout at the polls: 1,982,318 (56.18 percent)

1. Levan Gachechiladze	—25.69 percent
2. Arkady (Badri) Patarkatsishvili	—7.10 percent
3. David Gamkrelidze	—4.02 percent
4. Shalva Natelashvili	—6.49 percent

¹ Based on the materials of *Mtavari gazeti*, 5-6 January, 2004 (in Georgian).

5. Mikhail Saakashvili	—53.47 percent
6. Giorgi Maisashvili	—0.77 percent
7. Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia	—0.16 percent. ²

This was not an easy victory: the president carried merely 53.47 percent of the votes while his main rival, who represented the united opposition, received 25.69 percent. On the one hand, the opposition lost; on the other, 53.47 percent for the ruling regime was a sort of sensation. In fact, the people in power gathered barely enough to save the regime. On the other hand, they skillfully used the results of the two referendums to defuse the political tension inside the country and strengthen their position outside it. The election returns convinced the opposition that the regime could be changed in a democratic way, through elections: its leaders abandoned the idea of a revolution in favor of parliamentary elections. The choice was supported by the fact that at the referendum the nation voted for holding parliamentary elections in the summer of 2008 (the crisis was stirred up by disagreements over the date of the parliamentary elections). This created a political paradox: the opposition won the dispute over the election date while the government won the elections.

Georgian Elections: Geopolitical Dimension

The referendum on Georgia's NATO membership was intended as a certain geopolitical dimension of the Georgian elections; in this way the Saakashvili regime hoped to regain the West's support, which had somewhat slackened after the events of 7 November, 2007. The result (78 percent of positive votes) came as an unpleasant surprise: several years earlier a similar poll revealed a much larger share of NATO supporters. This fact confirmed that the referendum on NATO was also intended for domestic use. The geopolitical dimension, however, dominated during the parliamentary election campaign. It was addressed to those foreign (mainly American and European) observers who before the elections had sided with the Georgian government and criticized the opposition for its radicalism. For this reason it looked as though the opposition stood against the West. During the election campaign the leader of the main opposition alliance Levan Gachechiladze said at a meeting for everybody to hear: "We are not fighting the Saakashvili regime—we stand opposed to America's geopolitical interests." The government skillfully used this political blunder to accuse the opposition of pro-Russian sentiments. (The nation is very much anti-Russian which explains why accusations of a pro-Russian stand are used during election campaigns to discredit political opponents.)

The foreign policy dimension of the Georgian elections goes back to the pre-Rose Revolution times. It was in the summer of 2003 during the preparation for the parliamentary election campaign that former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker assumed the role of a moderator between the two sides. As a friend of then President Eduard Shevardnadze he convinced him to reform the election system on the very eve of the parliamentary elections, which allowed the opposition to gain a large number of seats in the Central Election Commission and, therefore, considerable political weight. This initiative became known as the Baker Formula. Later, in 2008, when speaking on TV Eduard Shevardnadze dismissed the initiative of his friend by saying: "It was the Baker Formula that was our undoing." Under this formula the political parties were equally represented in the Central Election Commission. After the revolution the election system was revised several times; this last happened in 2008.

² [www.cec.gov.ge], 2008.

Reforms of the Election System and Lowering the Seven-Percent Barrier

As soon as the results of the 2008 presidential election became known the Central Election Commission began preparations for the parliamentary elections. It charted two-stage reform of the Georgian election system in line with the recommendations supplied by the international organizations that took into account the shortcomings of the presidential election. The recommendations were mainly technical rather than political³ but some of the changes in the election law and the Constitution put an end to the polemics about the seven-percent barrier that had been going on for many years. Under Shevardnadze, in 1999 the parliamentary majority introduced amendments and addenda to the Constitution by raising the five-percent barrier for the parties running for parliament to seven percent.⁴ The change was initiated by Zurab Zhvania, speaker of the parliament and comrade-in-arms of President Shevardnadze (later one of the leaders of the Rose Revolution). This initiative was explained by the desire of the Georgian leaders to urge parties to merge for the sake of a stable political field. Later, the international community, and the Council of Europe in particular, criticized the “seven-percent rule.” When new people (headed by Zhvania and other leaders) came to power they long refused to change the rule. On the eve of the first post-revolutionary parliamentary elections they declined the Council of Europe’s request to lower the barrier because there was not enough time to initiate the corresponding legal procedures. In truth, they simply did not want to share the legislative powers with other forces. For the next five years the “revolutionary leaders” intended to establish strict discipline in the country to create prerequisites for the republic’s effective development, a situation that might require personal decisions. President Saakashvili repeated time and again that he did not need counterrevolutionaries in the legislature. Had the recommendations of the Council of Europe been accepted the first post-revolutionary elections of 28 March, 2005 might have brought the Laborites and Union-Renaissance headed by Aslan Abashidze to the parliament. The situation in the ruling party threatened to disrupt the plan of setting up a “constitutional majority” in the parliament.

Early in 2008 the Constitution was amended⁵ to no political avail. International organizations approved of this while the “political field” treated this step of the powers that be with caution. The lowered barrier tempted the members of the united opposition to run for parliament separately; most of the opposition parties, however, preferred to close ranks and not dissipate their forces. This time the opposition was confronted with new legal regulations and procedures introduced almost on the eve of the elections. The parties with no factions in the parliament, for example, had to gather 30 thousand signatures (instead of the 50 thousand required earlier) to run for parliament; the candidates in the majority constituencies were relieved of the task of gathering signatures (previously three thousand signatures were needed).

The Central Election Commission initiated amendments and addenda to the Election Code that the parliament adopted. Art 77, related to the procedure of filing applications/complaints about violations of the election procedure, was divided into two parts: the first described how and where applications/complaints should be filed, while the second specified the content of such applications/complaints.⁶ The amendments and addenda took into account the miscarriages in this procedure during

³ [www.OSCE.org/odihr], 2008.

⁴ See: Constitution of Georgia of 1995, Art 50:2, amendments of 1999.

⁵ See: Constitution of Georgia of 1995, Art 50:2, amendments of 2008.

⁶ See: Election Code of Georgia. Art 77, amendments of 2008.

the presidential elections. The Central Election Commission of Georgia organized training sessions for all those working in the election administration (there are about 51 thousand of them in Georgia working at 3,700 polling stations).

Manipulations with Figures and “Cemetery Votes”

The reforms did not address the main and seemingly eternal problem of the election system: falsification of the election results. In fact, public mistrust in the announced results repeatedly stirred up political crises and shook the political system. In recent years the election vocabulary acquired two new terms “carousel” and “cemetery votes.” They are interconnected and describe the system of falsification of election results dating back to the days of Eduard Shevardnadze.

The trick is to add names to the voter lists; not infrequently the names of minors (in Georgia all citizens over 18 have the right to vote) and people who have died (some of them born in 1800).

Emigrants (Georgian citizens living outside the country) are another source of falsifications.

These fictitious voters cast their votes for the official authorities in the following way: on election day activists of the ruling party travel from one polling station to another using the names of deceased people to cast “cemetery votes.”

Naturally enough, just as under Shevardnadze, the government today continues to deny that the election results are falsified in any way, with or without the “cemetery votes.” On the other hand, the government is hard pushed to explain to the opposition how the number of voters increases just a few months before the elections in a country with a steadily declining birth rate, radically changing demographic situation, and rising number of emigrants.

The government declined the accusations and insisted that it had exerted much effort to exclude the possibility of accruing “cemetery votes.” According to the Central Election Committee, the names of 25 thousand deceased persons and 30 thousand duplicate names that were registered simultaneously at two polling stations were removed from the voter lists.

There were also the so-called additional lists: about 2 million people out of the total of registered voters came to the polls to elect the president—70 thousand of them were entered on additional lists on polling day. By the parliamentary elections the “institution of additional lists” had been discarded; exit polls, however, remained to become another stumbling block in the relations between the government and the opposition.

Eduard Shevardnadze’s Delayed-Action Bomb

Implementation of the 2 November, 2003 referendum results initiated by Shevardnadze carried even more political weight than certain procedural and legal novelties. According to the results the number of deputies was cut from 235 to 150; this should have been enacted at the next parliamentary elections. Because of the revolution the “next parliamentary elections” took place immediately after the referendum, although its results were not implemented until 2008 because of a certain political paradox and legal nonsense. The revolution annulled the results of the proportionate representation (PR) elections while the candidates elected in the majority constituencies acquired their seats in the

parliament. To be more exact, 63 out of 85 candidates⁷ got into parliament while the others were awarded posts in the executive structures after the revolution.

The new “majority deputies” belonged to the following parties:

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|--|------------|
| 1. The National Movement—Democrats | —16 seats |
| 2. The Right Opposition—Industrialists—New | —7 seats |
| 3. The Alliance of Democratic Renaissance | —6 seats |
| 4. The Labor Party of Georgia | —2 seats |
| 5. The For New Georgia bloc (headed by Shevardnadze) | —19 seats. |

The other “majority deputies” were politically neutral; after the mid-term elections 85 deputies of the local quota joined them in the parliament.

This means that after the Rose Revolution the pre-term parliamentary elections of 28 March, 2004 affected only those elected within the proportionate system; two parties overcame the seven-percent barrier.

The parliamentary PR elections of 28 March, 2004

According to the CEC slightly over 1,500,000 voters came to the polls

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|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. The Socialist Party | —0.47 percent |
| 2. The Alliance of Democratic Renaissance | —6.02 percent |
| 3. The Right Opposition—Industrialists—New | —7.62 percent (15 seats) |
| 4. The Labor Party of Georgia | —5.81 percent |
| 5. The National Movement—Democrats (M. Saakashvili) | —67.02 percent (135 seats) |
| 6. The United Communist Party of Georgia | —0.04 percent |
| 7. The National-Democratic Party—Traditionalists | —2.52 percent |
| 8. Mdzleveli | —0.05 percent |
| 9. The Party of Defense of Constitutional Rights | —0.00 percent |
| 10. The Nationalists | —0.27 percent |
| 11. Samshoblo (Motherland) | —0.03 percent |
| 12. National Renaissance | —0.11 percent |
| 13. Ertoba (Unity) | —2.41 percent |
| 14. The Party of Democratic Law | —0.15 percent |
| 15. The Party of National Ideology for Georgia | —0.03 percent |
| 16. Nodar Natadze—Popular Front | —0.15 percent |
| 17. Fairness | —0.01 percent |
| 18. Political Movement Tavisupleba (Freedom)—
K. Gamsakhurdia | —4.23 percent |
| 19. Popular Alliance of All Georgia | —0.03 percent. ⁸ |

⁷ Based on the materials of *Mtavari gazeti* of 5 April, 2004.

⁸ Based on the materials of *Mtavari gazeti* of 1 April, 2004.

In 2008, the delayed-action bomb Eduard Shevardnadze had set in his time nearly destroyed the country's very fragile political system. Under the 2003 referendum the number of deputies was cut down, which meant that the seats should have been redistributed among the deputies elected by PR and in the majority constituencies (as it previously was under the Constitution, 150 deputies out of the total of 235 were elected by party lists, while 85 were elected in the majority constituencies).⁹

The constitutional amendments made it much harder for the "political field" to find another way of distributing the seats among the PR and majority deputies. Eighty-five "majority" deputies are elected from the republic's 85 districts (ten of them are elected from Tbilisi even though the number of districts in the capital has been cut to seven). The republic's administrative-territorial division is rooted in the Soviet past and has so far resisted all attempts to reform it. It should be added that the presence of "majority constituencies" violates one of the democratic principles, namely, an equal distribution of votes. Georgia uses the unjustified principle—"One district—one seat." This means that the Gldan District of Tbilisi, with about 140 thousand registered voters, and the Mesti District, with merely 6 thousand voters, are represented by one deputy each.

Later the Georgian authorities used the smaller number of seats to their advantage: they divided the remaining 150 seats into two equal parts; the parliament elected in 2004, which supplied the 2008 elections with a new legal basis, gave 75 seats to the PR and the same number of seats to majority deputies.

The political importance of this decision is obvious: the parliament elected in 2008 lost some of its former powers: in the past few years the majority deputies have remained fairly passive; they completed their term essentially unknown to the nation; as a rule (with few exceptions) they tended to play into the government's hands.

As a result, at the 2008 parliamentary elections the ruling party reaped 59.18 percent of the votes.

The Counterrevolution that Never Happened and a Parliament without Politicians

I have already written that the opposition threatened to stage a popular uprising if the election results were falsified. Twelve political entities took part in the elections: 9 parties and 3 political blocs. One of them—United Opposition—National Council—acted as the main opponent to power.

Over 1,850,000 voters came to the polling stations to cast their votes for

1. The National Movement (M. Saakashvili)	—59.18 percent
2. Georgian Politics	—0.46 percent
3. The Republican Party	—3.78 percent
4. The Right Alliance—Topadze—Industrialists	—0.93 percent
5. The Labor Party	—7.44 percent
6. The Union of Sportsmen of Georgia	—0.19 percent
7. United Opposition—National Council	—17.73 percent
8. The Radical-Democratic Party	—0.18 percent

⁹ See: Constitution of Georgia. Original version of 1995.

9. The Christian-Democratic Alliance	—0.89 percent
10. The Christian-Democratic Party	—8.66 percent
11. Traditionalists	—0.44 percent
12. Our Country	—0.12 percent. ¹⁰

The results were not sensational but the foreign observers approved of the elections and the far from high share of votes cast for the ruling party. The result was not quite satisfactory—the ruling party gained 71 out of 75 majority seats; 2 seats went to the United Opposition and 2 to the Republican Party. But for the convincing victory of the ruling power in the majority constituencies its modest PR results could have served as a springboard for the country's democratization. This did not happen: the government skillfully used the modest PR results to restore its international image and, on the other hand, gained the constitutional majority in the parliament.

Only 4 subjects negotiated the five-percent barrier in the PR constituencies:

1. The National Movement	—48 seats
2. United Opposition—National Council	—15 seats
3. The Christian-Democratic Party	—6 seats
4. The Labor Party	—6 seats. ¹¹

It looked strange that the Christian-Democratic Party and the Labor Party acquired an equal number of seats even though they received different numbers of votes. The ruling National Movement received 119 seats out of the total 150. Several deputies elected from the opposition (10 from the United Opposition—National Council and 4 from the Labor Party) relinquished their mandates.

The ruling party gained the constitutional majority in the parliament. In Georgia people are more inclined to trust political leaders rather than parties. This created another paradox: despite his plummeting personal rating President Saakashvili remained more popular among the people than his ruling party, although the elections proved the opposite. Those who hinted that the election results had been falsified used this paradox to support their suspicions. In 2003 the Rose Revolution was ignited by the suspicions that the election results had been falsified. A mere comparison of the 2003 and 2008 figures confirms such suspicions. In 2003 the For New Georgia Bloc of Eduard Shevardnadze received a modest share of the votes; on the other hand, the For New Georgia and the Alliance for Democratic Renaissance allied with the Shevardnadze bloc could have received nearly half of the seats in the PR constituencies. With a certain number of the “majority deputies” on his side, Shevardnadze stood a good chance of retaining control over the legislature.

Parliamentary elections of 2 November, 2003

Turnout according to the CEC: 1,909,215

1. Bloc For New Georgia (407,045 votes) 21.32 percent (party of E. Shevardnadze)	—38 seats
2. Renaissance (359,769 votes) 18.84 percent (party of A. Abashidze)	—33 seats
3. National Movement (345,197 votes) 18.08 percent (party of M. Saakashvili)	—32 seats
4. The Labor Party (229,900 votes) 12.04 percent	—20 seats

¹⁰ [www.cec.gov.ge], 2008.

¹¹ [www.cec.gov.ge], 2008.

5. Burdzhnadarze—Democrats (167,908 votes) 8.79 percent —15 seats
(party of Z. Zhvania)
6. The New Right (140,259 votes), 7.35 percent —12 seats.¹²

The results of the parliamentary elections of 21 May, 2008 allow the ruling party to amend the Constitution as it sees fit. This is especially important in view of the fact that President Saakashvili is serving his second, and last, term. On the other hand, the post-Soviet leaders tend to extend their time in office.

The 2008 elections differed from the previous elections by the fact that it was no longer politicians but businessmen who were seeking seats in the legislature. The ruling party either entered prominent Georgian businessmen (who had supported Shevardnadze and abandoned him to side with Saakashvili, whom they supported with their money) on the party lists or nominated them in majority constituencies. Whereas in the past Georgian businessmen were used merely for shelling out money during the election campaigns, in 2008 they found themselves in the midst of the political struggle. The Georgians aptly called the newly elected parliament “a legislature without politicians.” As a result the country elected a parliament of bankers, wine makers, builders, and all sorts of businessmen. There are about 30 of them in the new parliament. This means that the ruling party that won the elections is not represented by party activists.

In Georgia part of the nation failed to grasp the meaning of the legislature and its deputies; the 2008 elections devalued the very idea of a deputy still further. Many of the future deputies ran their election campaigns with promises of repairing roads, building new houses, etc. if they got elected. Significantly, the promises came from those engaged in the construction business while Art 53:1 of the Georgian Constitution of 1995 says: “A member of parliament shall not be entitled to hold any position in public office or engage in an entrepreneurial activity.” Election campaigns of this sort (especially those run by the majority candidates) are typical of post-Soviet Georgia. Some of those who made it into parliament continued the old game of “looking after the people’s interests.” As soon as the powers of the new parliament were officially recognized the deputies pushed aside their supposedly main function—legislative activities—and plunged into enthusiastic discussions of how to rehabilitate the historical part of the Georgian capital.

Administrative Resource and Ethnic Minorities as a Source of Votes

The opposition never limits itself to accusations of falsification of the election returns—it never loses sight of the fact that during election campaigns the government abuses its administrative resource. This (as well as many other abuses) can be traced back to the presidentship of Eduard Shevardnadze when the government started using public funds for its election campaigns. The ruling party does not merely draw from public material funds—it also employs civil servants (mainly policemen and law enforcers) in its interests. This practice is still very much alive.

It was thanks to the administrative resource (under Shevardnadze and after the revolution) that the government reaped a huge number of votes in the areas populated by ethnic minorities. It had become a tradition that the votes gathered in Azeri-populated Nizhni Kartli and Armenian-populated Samtskhe-Javakhetia greatly affected the election results. So far no one has revealed the secret of the crushing victories of Georgian power in these regions. The Georgian rulers hold forth about the ethnic minor-

¹² Based on the materials of *Mtavari gazeti* of 21 November, 2003.

ities' loyalty to the Georgian state and its authorities. It is suspected, however, that inadequate knowledge of the Georgian language in these regions is the source of the election triumphs.

Election Campaign in the Media and the Specifics of Political Adverts

The nation regards political adverts as a way to manipulate public consciousness by employing secret methods rather than a legal and absolutely acceptable form of communication with the voters. To get to the heart of this matter let us discuss two types of political adverts placed in the media.

The Election Code regulates the media activities during the election campaign and looks after fair distribution of free and paid adverts in the media. The Code also distinguishes between the "qualified" and "unqualified" entities and points out that the right to an equal share of broadcasting time and similar conditions for participating in debates apply to the "qualified entities." The latter are formed by candidates of the parliamentary parties or candidates of the parties that received at least four percent of the votes at previous elections.¹³ For this reason, during the 2008 election campaign Georgia's public television gave each of the "qualified" entities 60 free seconds per hour; the "non-qualified" entities had to be satisfied with 30 seconds per hour. During the presidential and parliamentary elections, according to official information, the ruling party spent 12-12.5 million lari on paid political events.¹⁴

It should be said that all the election campaigns—be they presidential or parliamentary—unfolded in conditions of minimum pluralism in the media. This prompted, to a certain extent, the political crisis of 7 November, 2008 that led to the state of emergency in the republic and the ban on political information. This means that the presidential election campaign essentially unfolded in the state of emergency soon lifted under Western pressure. The opposition Imedi TV Company could resume broadcasting, which had been stopped after the events of 7 November, only with European interference. For this purpose European structures dispatched prominent Polish journalist Adam Michnik to Georgia. He succeeded, however later (on the eve of parliamentary elections) the journalists of the TV channel discontinued broadcasting. This was a big loss for the opposition: for a long time the company served as the only channel through which the opposition reached out to the public. During the election campaign the opposition demanded a simplified approach to public TV channels, therefore even before the parliamentary elections the opposition, along with the government, set about reorganizing public television. On 26 February, 2008 the parliament approved a new council of trustees of public television: its nine members were elected by consensus. The new members elected a general director. On the council's initiative, public television and the political parties signed a memorandum on mutual understanding. This happened on 16 April. Under this document public television pledged to offer "balanced, objective, and impartial coverage of each candidate and to make a distinction in the news bulletins between 'election news' and 'official news'."¹⁵ The TV channels pledged to cover the election campaign of the parties and candidates in their "election news" bulletins and reserve "official news" for coverage of the official activities of the state structures. Between 21 April and 20 May public television organized televised debates for the "election candidates" twice a week. Each of the candidates was given 36 minutes of free TV time to present his election program.

These efforts at liberalization were not enough: on the whole the situation with TV coverage (especially during the parliamentary elections) was lamentable. The government not only used the

¹³ [www.OSCE.org/odihr], 2008.

¹⁴ [www.civil.ge/eng/_article.php?id=16927], 2008.

¹⁵ The Memorandum between Public Television and Political Parties, 16 April, 2008.

officially permitted political adverts (presentation of programs and videotaped adverts), it also exploited, mainly with the help of the media it controlled, latent political adverts: “official news bulletins” passed the election activities of the ruling party for the everyday routine work of the state administration structures. Day after day the nation watched how members of the power structures flanked by “majority deputies” opened new playgrounds, public gardens, and construction sites. It was precisely for this reason that public television, under pressure from the opposition, had made the distinction between “election” and “official” news (in keeping with the memorandum). All the other channels, however, played into the hands of the ruling party: during the presidential election campaign they offered information against the background of the official slogan “Georgia without Poverty.” During the parliamentary campaign, the government changed it to “Business Instead of Idle Talk.” The TV companies that played on the side of the government carried out a public opinion poll to identify the most successful election slogan. It comes as no surprise that the slogan of the ruling party frequently aired on TV and consistently repeated by candidates of the ruling party (along with promises of the country’s bright future, new jobs, etc.) easily won.

To shed more light on the situation with the media in Georgia during the election campaigns let us look at some of the results of the media monitoring carried out during the presidential and parliamentary elections by the OSCE observer mission. This monitoring included quantitative and qualitative analyses of media coverage, the time allocated to each of the candidates, the amount of space, and the tone of the coverage.

It turned out that during the presidential campaign public television allocated 27 percent of political and election coverage to Mikhail Saakashvili (98 percent of the coverage was either positive or neutral), while the independent Rustavi-2 and Mze channels obviously supported Saakashvili. During the parliamentary elections public television divided its prime time equally between the main opposition bloc and the ruling party. It should be said, however, that 59 percent of the time the ruling party was described in positive terms and 39 percent of the time neutrally. In the case of the opposition positive coverage shrank to 5 percent, while 95 percent of coverage was neutral.¹⁶ Other national channels, Rustavi-2 in particular, boycotted the opposition bloc in their information programs because the opposition leaders complained about their journalists. Twice a week Rustavi-2 organized debates for the political parties, as well as presentations of their election platforms.

C o n c l u s i o n

Georgia’s 2008 elections were a test of democracy. The West was looking forward to finally deciding whether Georgia deserved a place among the civilized states or whether it should remain part of the post-Soviet expanse. The Georgian leaders of the Rose Revolution aspired to remove the “Soviet stigma” from the country and join the ranks of the East European states. They have done a lot to present the world with the country’s new democratic image and succeeded: President George W. Bush, who visited the country after the Rose Revolution, hailed Georgia as the “beacon of liberty for this region and the world.” Georgia, along with Ukraine and other East European countries, came to be known as “a state of new democracy.” The “beacon of liberty,” however, began gradually waning, so Georgia needed to go to the polls to prove its continued loyalty to the democratic values. Significantly, after the Rose Revolution Georgia’s political fate became closely connected with Ukraine, where a revolution followed the Georgian pattern. It seems that Georgia can learn a lot from Ukraine’s experience of resolving political crises through elections. The results of the 2008 elections show that the “Motherland of Color Revolutions” failed the test of democracy. On the other hand, the West hailed the fact that the elections took

¹⁶ www.OSCE.org/odhr], 2008.

place in a stable situation. It probably feared that the events would develop along the Armenian pattern where bloodshed started as soon as the election results were announced. The West did not want this—Georgia was a very promising partner. The Georgian authorities, in turn, could not go against what the world community thought. Unlike Armenia, Georgia's clearly stated foreign policy vector forced it to demonstrate restraint in the event of crises. The NATO summit held in Bucharest early in the summer of 2008 responded with a special memorandum to Georgia's desire to join the alliance. NATO formulated its central political demand: to become a member Georgia must hold democratic elections.

The Georgian authorities have coped with this difficult political task. On the one hand, they organized outwardly democratic elections and, on the other, won them in the most convincing way. The West and the Georgian authorities were satisfied while the opposition and those who voted for it were left out in the cold. This means that the elections, which were expected to defuse the political crisis and narrow down the gap, failed to achieve this.