

# GEORGIA ON THE EVE OF ANOTHER ELECTION CYCLE

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**O**n 1 October, 2005, five one-candidate (majority) constituencies went to the polls to elect their parliament deputies.<sup>1</sup> Even

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<sup>1</sup> "Additional" seems to be a more apt description for this election officially called "midterm."

though the results could not tip the balance of forces in the country's legislature where the ruling bloc and its supporters dominate absolutely, they added heat to the already fairly hot confrontation between the government and the opposition. The ruling party wanted to prove that its high rating

remained intact, while the opposition hoped to demonstrate that the public was already on its side. The election was expected to demonstrate whether the institution of elections was functioning properly in a country in which mass falsification of

election results in the past provoked a “velvet revolution” and which was entering another election cycle (in 2006, the country will elect local administrations, in 2008, the parliament, and in 2009, the president).

## Specifics of Post-Revolutionary Elections

In a country where the falsification of election results triggered a revolution and the old government was overturned, the new leaders naturally bear enormous responsibility for ensuring fair and objective elections. This is not an easy task for several objective and subjective reasons.

A “velvet revolution” speaks of the weakness and the strength of the democratic forces at one and the same time: it is a unique phenomenon which cannot be reproduced after any falsified elections. It starts when the absolute majority is fed up with its leaders and hopes to live better if they are overturned. This means that the “angry voters” take to the streets, not so much to defend their democratic rights as to remove the people at the helm. Falsified elections do not cause “velvet revolutions”—they merely trigger them. Post-revolutionary euphoria renders a rational choice impossible: the victors are in the limelight and the dazzled nation expects them to work miracles. Whereas in Ukraine, only the presidential election was carried out amid post-revolutionary euphoria, in Georgia, where the revolutionary forces were much stronger, they won both the presidential election of 4 January, 2004, with Mikhail Saakashvili elected as president, and the parliamentary election of 28 March, 2004, when the bloc of the Rose Revolution leaders carried the day.

The revolutionary leaders promised a much better life to the entire nation, yet ideas about it differed greatly. More than that, many expected lavish dividends here and now. After a while, however, came the realization that life was not improving as fast as it had been expected, while new problems created a negative background for what had been achieved. In fact, these achievements are taken for granted.

For this reason, the guests who came to Tbilisi to celebrate the second anniversary of the Rose Revolution agreed that much had changed for the better; at the same time, a large part of the public and the opposition are talking about wasted opportunities and failures which did not allow the new leaders to make life even better.

It seems that the dissatisfaction of a large number of disappointed voters will not allow Mikhail Saakashvili and his party to receive more or even the same number of votes they won at the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections. Strange as it may seem, a defeat at the next fair and democratic election they themselves make possible and withdrawal from power could be interpreted as a victory: this will demonstrate that Georgia has become a democratic state in which democratic elections are the norm and in which the cause of the Rose Revolution was uprooted.

## After the Revolutionary Euphoria

The Rose Revolution has radically changed the country’s political spectrum, from which the political forces that missed the revolution are now excluded for a long time to come. Convinced that

a weak opposition is a disadvantage, the European Council suggests that the election barrier should be lowered from 7 to 5 percent. The Georgian government declined the European suggestion: “We offered our own arguments. Even with a 7 percent barrier, the parliament will not be deprived of its political spectrum,” said Vice Speaker Mikhail Machavariani.<sup>2</sup>

The Georgian leaders do not need a strong opposition, they will do their best to preserve its high rating. This will make the National Movement Party a victim of sorts: it will be impossible to score a victory similar to that in 2004, while a lower result will be regarded as a defeat. The opposition will have to fight hard to procure a “place in the sun”—it will exploit the hardships caused by the reforms and the failures of the present rulers. According to the Gorbi Center of Social Studies, in August 2003 (on the eve of the Rose Revolution), 84 percent of the polled were convinced that the country was taking the wrong road; 5 percent were convinced of the opposite. In December 2003, after the revolution, the situation changed: only 14 percent of the polled were still convinced that the country had taken the wrong road, while 68 percent believed that the road was the right one. These sentiments extended into 2004; by early 2005, it became clear that the percentage of those who approved of the domestic developments had dropped dramatically. In March 2005, 39 percent of the polled disapproved of the chosen road, while 31 percent believed that the course was a correct one.

These figures can be hardly explained by the painful reforms: in anticipation of better living conditions, the nation still supports them. It seems that the dissatisfaction is aroused by the mistakes and the inadequately prepared reforms, primarily in the economic sphere. People cannot wait another ten years: they have already spent ten years waiting under Shevardnadze.

This gives the opposition a chance to regain its place on the political stage by exploiting the mistakes of the government and protest actions and by uniting into larger associations. The 2006 elections to the local administrations will give the opposition structures a chance to test their strength.

## On Whom the Fate of Elections Depends

According to the latest tradition, the Central Election Commission includes representatives of various parties, which, in the capacity of the main election entities, have never doubted this principle. There were a lot of disagreements, however, around personal representation: the government tried to gain a majority in the Central Election Commission, while the opposition frantically opposed this. On 22 April, 2005, the Election Code was amended: from that time on the Central Election Commission was formed according to professional rather than party principle. The new Central Election Commission will consist of seven members (one chairman and six members) elected by the parliament on the president’s recommendation after an open competition. Under the law, the candidate should not belong to any of the parties, have higher education, and a work record of at least three years, and these people should be respected in society and hold the certificate of an administrative civil servant. It is impossible today to fulfill the latter requirement, since there is no structure empowered to issue such certificates.<sup>3</sup>

While carrying out this reform, the government spared no words to convince the public that the coming elections would not develop into political haggling: the Central Election Commission staffed with professionals will guarantee fair elections.

<sup>2</sup> See: *Rezonansi*, 12 May, 2005 (in Georgian.)

<sup>3</sup> See: *Novye 7 dney* newspaper, 3-9 June, 2005.

The opposition has resolutely refused to accept this,<sup>4</sup> because, it argued, it was the president, the head of the ruling party, who was entrusted with the right to select the members and the chairman, who would inevitably turn out to be either party members or its supporters. In other words, says the opposition, the country will be left with a one-party Central Election Commission—a fact fraught with the threat of falsifications.<sup>5</sup> Pikria Chikhradze, a member of the right-wing opposition represented in the parliament, said: “No one should expect objectivity because the parliamentary majority adopted an Election Code which excludes any objectivity.”<sup>6</sup> Zviad Dzidzighuri, one of the conservative leaders, said that this will cause another revolution: “All elections in which the National Movement intends to take part will be falsified until this stirs up unrest and destabilization in the country.” Kakha Kukava, another opposition leader, agrees with his colleague: “The way the Central Election Commission is formed today will lead to another Rose Revolution. The government needs this sort of commission in order to falsify the elections, since the government’s rating is too low. The ruling party will obviously lose the coming elections. For our part, we shall never reconcile ourselves with falsifications; we shall bring people into the streets and send Saakashvili to the same place we have already sent Shevardnadze. This election commission could have been appointed by Lukashenko or Niyazov.”<sup>7</sup> Other opposition leaders agreed with the above.

The leaders categorically reject all the accusations: “Under this model responsibility rests upon us, the representatives of power. We promise to consolidate the international standards,” said Gia Bokeria, one of the most active members of the parliamentary majority.<sup>8</sup> He said that this pattern won the support of all the NGOs under Shevardnadze: “It seems that the opposition is sure of losing the elections and is doing its best to prepare people for this.”<sup>9</sup>

Some international experts welcome the idea of separating the elections administration and the political parties. Bernard Owen, electoral expert from the Venice Commission, Director of the French Center for Comparative Studies of Elections, has pointed out that it would be no overstatement to say that on the road to this reform Georgia has outstripped even the United States.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the foreign experts were puzzled by the lack of trust demonstrated by the opposition. It was under Shevardnadze that a delegation of the European Council monitoring committee headed by Matias Yorsh recommended that the Georgian leaders staff the Central Election Commission according to professional attributes. Today, however, Evgeni Kirillov, speaking for the same group, announced that since the political parties are obviously distrustful of a professional Central Election Commission, it should be composed on the parity principle.<sup>11</sup>

On 3 June, 2005, the parliament, or rather its majority, approved the new Central Election Commission. The opposition preferred to boycott the voting and left the assembly hall. It issued a critical

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<sup>4</sup> The new mechanism of staffing the Central Election Commission works in the following way: anyone wishing to become a commission member should apply to the State Chancellery. It received 32 applications from those wishing to fill the post of chairman and 483 applications from those who wanted to fill one of the six posts of commission member (*Rezonansi*, 28 May, 2005). A special commission selected 30 names out of 483 applicants and several names out of 32 applications. On 30 May, the president submitted the 12 names of those who wanted to be members and one name for chairman. Under the law, the president should supply two names for each position—it is for the parliament to select the best candidate.

<sup>5</sup> The opposition made up of the Republicans, Conservatives, the New Industrialists alliance, and the Svoboda political alliance offered the government an alternative. They insisted that, once the professional requirements were satisfied, the president should share the right to nominate candidates with the political organizations and that the results of previous elections should be taken into account (*Novye 7 dney*, 3-9 June, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> *Rezonansi*, 30 May, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *Zavtrashniy den*, 3 October, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See: *24 chasa* newspaper, 4 June, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> *Rezonansi*, 30 May, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See: *24 chasa*, 19 October, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> See: *Rezonansi*, 12 November, 2005.

statement about the structure's one-party composition and warned about inevitable falsification of the election results. The election held on 1 October, 2005 proved to be the first test for the newly appointed structure.

## Results of the Midterm Election

On 1 October, 2005, the candidates of the United National Movement, the party of power, won in all five constituencies. The parliamentary majority gained five more members. This increase was of secondary importance—the main thing for the party of power was to confirm its popularity. This was why President Saakashvili said the following: “I think that the victory was an important and highly inspiring one. Those who several months ago said that in the summer Saakashvili would have no power are back to square one. This election has demonstrated that our power has not weakened—it is gaining strength and winning more ground in Georgian society.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the president expressed his concern with the opposition's “catastrophic defeat” because, said he, “normally, midterm elections are believed to give the opposition a chance. In Georgia, the opposition should have done its best to win in these five constituencies. This means that the opposition in Georgia is obviously weak, which is bad. The time has come for it to gain strength.” The president explained that the opposition lost because of its tendency to concentrate on the negative aspects, while the nation needed hope. The government gave them hope. The president called on the opposition to change their methods, since any government in power, even the most successful, needs a constructive, responsible, and dedicated opposition.<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, the opposition disagreed with this: the defeats in the five constituencies were not a collapse. In fact, the election demonstrated that society is becoming more critically minded. “The opposition did not nominate its leaders at this election, yet 1 October demonstrated that the government has a low rating. According to public opinion polls, it is no higher than 25 percent, while the combined ratings of the four opposition parties is higher,” said David Berdzenishvili, one of the Republican Party's leaders.<sup>14</sup>

The opposition has many misgivings about the election campaign, its fairness, and its objectivity: its representatives announced that the candidates from the government had budget money and the administrative resource at their disposal, as well as support of the president and premier. The government went to all lengths to prevent an opposition candidate from winning in any of the constituencies. The opposition mainly objects to the way the voter lists were compiled—even though the tested instrument called the “carousel” had been dropped, many of the names were absent from the lists. The opposition insists that the Central Election Commission falsified the lists in compliance with orders from above.<sup>15</sup> The names of those who expressed opposition sentiments were absent from the lists.<sup>16</sup>

The government says that the nation supports it and that the opposition was defeated, while the opponents of the government forecast that the powers that be will lose the 2006 local elections if they are conducted fairly. Those who do not expect fairness are talking about another revolution: “We shall

<sup>12</sup> *Novoe pokolenie*, 3 October, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *24 chasa*, 3 October, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See: *Zavtrashniy den*, 3 October, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> See: *Novaia versia*, 3 October, 2005.

be not allowed to conduct elections by peaceful means. I fear clashes between the government and those voters who come to the polls but will not be allowed to vote. The opposition will protect them anyway. Since the government will resist, we can expect a repetition of 23 November, 2003,” said Kakha Kukava, one of the leaders of the conservative party.<sup>17</sup>

These contrasting assessments of the election process cannot but cause concern: the government and the opposition have failed to start a dialog again. The Election Code and the voter lists should be checked and re-checked: if the number of people who failed to discover their names on the voter lists proves large, doubts will cast aspersions on the election’s legitimacy. Due to the mounting opposition between the political forces, confrontation will be inevitable.

The opposition forces all agree that the new government will falsify the election with a zeal comparable to that demonstrated by the Shevardnadze regime. They say that this is confirmed not only by the results of midterm election on 1 October, but also by the new rules for forming election commissions. Regretfully, it can only be said that after the “velvet revolution,” the country is not putting a great deal of trust in the institution of elections.

## The Government and the Opposition: A Confrontational Model

The European Council’s resolution on Georgia passed in January 2005 pointed out the weakness of Georgia’s opposition; this is described as a deep pitfall on the road to democracy. The draft resolution spoke about the absence of an opposition, yet the Georgian leaders managed to replace the word “absence” with the words “weak opposition.”<sup>18</sup> The present rulers merely shrug their shoulders—it isn’t our fault the nation supported us. Saakashvili even went as far as to say that it is beyond the government’s power to clone an opposition.

The year 2006 will give the opposition several chances to test its strength: traditionally it does well at local elections; in any case, it did well in 1998 and 2002 under Shevardnadze. This time, the government will find it hard to repeat its success of 28 March, 2004.

Today, political opposition is undergoing a transition, while the Georgian leaders are treating it with a lot of disdain and cynicism. According to the president, the right-wingers “are leftovers from Shevardnadze’s era, and they never thought about anything except their own prosperity.”<sup>19</sup> The opposition pays in kind with ridicule and abuse. It seems that the sides will go on in the same vein, which is not conducive to democratic political culture and is fraught with destabilization.

Experts do not exclude the possibility of a single opposition bloc in 2006. We should never forget, however, that in the past these elections were used to test the party’s potential, therefore, the opposition parties may try to overcome the 4 percent barrier of the local elections individually.

There is a lot of talk about another revolution because of mistrust in the upcoming elections: the nation and the opposition are equally impressed by the Rose Revolution: if it was possible in the past, it might be possible in the future. There are two types of opposition in Georgia: the pro-Western opposition, which objects to what the government is doing from the “greater democracy” viewpoint and talks about an inevitable revolution, and the pro-Russian opposition, which is distancing itself from

<sup>17</sup> *24 chasa*, 3 October, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *Novaia versia*, 2-3 February, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *24 chasa*, 11 February, 2005.

the West and perceives the country's future in an alliance with Russia. Because of Russia's attitude toward official Tbilisi, however, this opposition stands no chance in the elections. This explains why the stakes are being placed on social upheaval and another revolution. This threat may remain unfulfilled and be limited to psychological pressure on the government; but if the situation destabilizes, the threat might become very real.

Revolution infatuation is dangerous; it would have been wise to introduce a provision on holding democratic and fair elections into the "national consensus" document drafted in the parliament on the majority's initiative and to take concrete steps toward its realization.