



GEORGIAN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS: SAAKASHVILI'S GRAND SLAM

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For the second time in less than five months, the Georgians went to the polling stations on May 21. In January, 53% of them confirmed Mikhail Saakashvili in the post of President of the Republic, a position which he put in play after the street demonstrations of November 7, 2007.

On the occasion of the Presidential balloting, international observers deemed that *'everything took place in conformity with the principles and obligations of the OSCE and the Council of Europe'*¹ but at the same time insisted there were a certain number of problems that the Georgian authorities had to solve before the legislative elections in May 2008. Among these problems were media coverage that was too openly favourable to the incumbent; the partiality of certain members of the electoral commission; incomplete, approximate or imprecise electoral registration lists, as well as reported incidents of kidnapping or physical violence against opponents.

One might say that the legislative elections of May 2008 are seen by the Western world, which was surprised, burned, even irritated by the psycho-rigidity of the government in the face of the events of November, as a serious test for the future of Georgia within the international community and as a true entrance exam into multinational organisations (NATO and the EU) where this country would like to belong.

1. A disputable election

a. Some progress, to be sure...

The observers are unanimous in noting real progress compared to the Presidential election in January. João Soares, coordinator of the international mission of observers and head of the delegation of the parliamentary assembly of the OSCE, said during a press conference on May 22 that *'these elections were not perfect,'* but that since his arrival in January *'some concrete and important progress has been achieved.'*²

¹ http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2008/01/29182_en.pdf

² Preliminary report of the international mission of observers to the Georgian legislative elections. <http://www.oscepa.org/home>

Mátyás Eörsi, chief of the parliamentary delegation of the Council of Europe, believes that *'the Georgians had the opportunity to express themselves on May 21, with the hope of putting an end to recurrent political conflicts and creating the conditions for a new type of dialogue between all the political forces of the country.'*³

For her part, Marie-Anne Isler Béguin, who headed the delegation of the European Parliament, attests to the heavy public involvement in the process and especially that of the young generations. She calls upon the political parties *'not to spoil this real opportunity for dialogue with civil society.'*⁴

As for Bruce George, chief of the delegation of the parliamentary assembly of NATO, he confirms *'important changes in Georgia with respect to democratisation and the electoral process.'*⁵

b. ... but more can be done!

However, the observers agree to recognise that despite the notable efforts undertaken by the Georgian authorities to come closer to international criteria, this election was *'sullied by irregularities and incomplete.'*⁶

According to Boris Frlec from the Bureau of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (BIDDH/OSCE) and chief of the OSCE's permanent observation mission, *'the operations of voting and counting ballots do not mark the end of the electoral process... Now one should verify the publication of these results and judge the manner by which recourse will be handled by the Electoral Commission, and that is why this permanent mission will remain in Georgia until the real end of the process.'*⁷

For their part, the national observers – the *Georgian Young Lawyers' Association* (GYLA) and the coalition of NGOs consisting of the Women's Network of the Caucasus, the International Centre for the Resolution of Conflicts, the Centre for the Protection of Constitutional Rights and the Centre of Human Rights – denounced on the evening of May 21 those cases of intimidation, pressure, verbal and physical violence which compelled them to withdraw their observers from a certain number of polling stations where serious problems were confirmed.⁸

On the day after the balloting, the Electoral Commission cancelled the results of 14 voting stations and also announced that an investigation was under way in 8 other stations following problems pointed out by international or national observers.⁹ In total, as of May 27 the Electoral Commission had declared the effective cancellation of the results in 17 voting stations (out of more than 3,600), which does not change the overall results in any way.

Of all the analyses made during the electoral campaign and during the voting, it was that made by Vladimir Papava, an analyst at the Georgian Foundation for International and Strategic Studies, that best sums up the mood of frustration which comes from the preliminary report of the observer missions. He deplores the overly cautious attitude of the international community which, according to him, gives the disagreeable impression of double standards on the part of the West: *'The Germans, the British and the French would*

³ Idem.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Preliminary report of the international observer mission to the Georgian legislative elections.

<http://www.oscepa.org/home>

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ <http://www.civilgeorgia.ge/eng/article.php?id=18338>

⁹ <http://cec.gov.ge/?que=eng/press-center/press-releases&info=3854>

certainly not agree to live in a democracy which resembles what they are proposing for us. The Westerners are closing their eyes to what they should be denouncing.’¹⁰

In other words – and this has a tendency to become an annoying habit – the international observer missions are satisfied to make an overall judgment, such as ‘*globally in agreement with the norms and standards of democracy*’ that is sufficiently indulgent towards the authorities to avoid overwhelming them and cleverly measured to allow the defeated to criticize the election without giving them arguments in support of popular outbursts and things getting out of hand. They know very well that any other judgment than that could lead to serious disturbances, which is the last thing that they want.

2. A final victory

Whatever the criticisms arising from the organisation and running of the election of May 21, the extent of the success of the Presidential party, the National Movement, is irrevocable. This tidal wave, which leaves the Opposition ‘*K.O.’d,* even ‘*astonished*’¹¹ President Saakashvili who, in the night of May 21st/22nd appeared on television to congratulate himself in the manner of Louis XVIII in August 1815 when he had at his disposal an ‘*unobtainable chamber*’¹² with the pleasure of having a Parliament totally on his side.

With its 119 seats, the National Movement has all by itself the 2/3 majority required for any possible revision of the Constitution. After the convincing victory of his party in the municipal elections of 2006 and his reelection to the Presidency in January 2008, President Saakashvili can justly boast of a new ‘grand slam’ victory.

a. The collapse of the Opposition coalition

In the outgoing Parliament which had 235 seats, of which 150 were assigned proportionally and 75 to the majority winners, the Opposition could count on 62 deputies. The National Movement had 153 there (4 less than the ‘*constitutional*’ 2/3 majority) and the independents and non-party deputies numbered 20.

Henceforth, in the new Parliament that has just been elected there are 150 seats that were allocated half to the proportional vote of electoral lists and half for the majority winners. The Opposition all together has just 31 seats. At the end of the day, the National Movement of President Saakashvili has taken 71 of the 75 seats open to the majority winners and, with nearly 60% of the votes, 48 of the 75 seats that were allocated proportionally. It was followed by the National Council – United Opposition – New Rights¹³ which obtained 17.6%, the Christian Democratic Party, 8.6%, and the Labour Party, 7.5%.

The collapse of the National Council – United Opposition – New Right is especially significant in Tbilisi. While the results of the Presidential election ended with the capital in the hands of the Opposition, the scenario now turned into a nightmare. The principal

¹⁰ http://www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&s=f&o=344751&apc_state=henpcrs

¹¹ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18347>

¹² The new chamber of deputies, elected on August 14 and 21, 1815, has always been celebrated as the ‘*unobtainable chamber,*’ an expression attributed to Louis XVIII. He meant by this that one could hardly imagine a parliament more favourable to his throne.

¹³ The electoral bloc of the National Council – United Opposition – New Rights follows from the Presidential alliance which supported the candidacy of Levan Gachechiladze in January 2008. After the Presidential election, the Republican Party quit the alliance and the Party of New Rights entered it. The bloc comprises the Party of the New Rights, the Conservative Party, the Path of Georgia, the Party of Liberty, By Ourselves, the Party of the People, the Movement of Unified Georgia, the Georgian Group and the National Forum.

challenger to Mikhail Saakashvili, Levan Gachechiladze, a former Presidential candidate of the Opposition Bloc who was, with 40.5%, largely ahead in Tbilisi (he won in eight districts out of ten) was now beaten, with 34.5%, in his own district of Samgori (Tbilisi) by the candidate of the National Movement, who won with 53.5% of the votes. The United Opposition only took two of the ten districts of Tbilisi.

b. The ‘divine surprise’ of the Christian Democrats

This party delivered a remarkable performance. It was launched in February by Giorgi Targamadze, a former star presenter and director of political programmes of the *Imedi*¹⁴ television network, and had a fine breakthrough with 8.6% of the votes, which raises it from its entry into the electoral arena to third position among the political parties. Taking advantage of the vacuum at the centre of the political chessboard and surfing skillfully on the religious feeling of the Georgians – the defence of Georgian Orthodox Christianity figures in the front ranks of its programme – its leaders succeeded where many illustrious predecessors have failed.¹⁵

Congratulating himself on this success, which assures him of seven seats, Giorgi Targamadze has already rejected the idea of joining in the boycott of parliament proposed by the leaders of other Opposition parties. Presenting himself as a responsible politician, he wants ‘*to be accountable to the approximately two hundred thousand voters who placed confidence in his party to defend the ideas that are also theirs.*’¹⁶ He thus places himself resolutely in line with political leaders who, like Davit Usupashvili of the Republican Party, think that ‘*even if the present leaders are far from being the best, they are worth more than the irresponsible leaders of a grumpy, noisy and turbulent Opposition.*’¹⁷

c. The relative defeat of the Republican Party

Unable in the proportional voting on party lists to break through the threshold of 5%, the Republican Party only owes its well-being to the majority winner allocation, thanks to which it won two seats. However, this was not for lack of signs of good will. Somewhat before the election, one of its leaders, Temur Nergadzé, said he was ‘*ready to cooperate with the government and it would only depend on what proposals were made to it.*’¹⁸ The extent of the victory of the Presidential party could reduce its hopes to zero unless President Saakashvili really decides to practice an overture towards politicians of good will. In that case, many observers believe such an overture should be made towards the Christian Democratic deputies on a priority basis.

d. The Labour Party saves its head

The Labour Party of Shalva Natelashvili was eliminated from the race for seats during the majority winner allocations and will find itself in Parliament with 5 or 6 deputies thanks to its score of 7.5% in the proportional voting for lists. Its leader is calling upon its deputies to join the boycott of the Parliament proposed by the parties of the United Opposition Bloc.

¹⁴ The television network which belonged to the late Badri Patarkatsishvili, the nefarious billionaire businessman and well-acknowledged opponent of Saakashvili and which was prohibited to broadcast following the events of November 2007.

¹⁵ Among the resounding defeats, that of Salome Zurabishvili, the Minister of Foreign Affairs who was dismissed in October 2005 and later launched his political party, ‘The Path of Georgia’ in January 2006. He garnered just 2.5% of the votes in the municipal elections of October 5 of the same year.

¹⁶ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18362>

¹⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/5/7B74B4AC-7FA0-4A23-B51F-BB9410ED728C.html>

¹⁸ *Idem.*

3. The time for explanations

a. On the side of the majority

When asked about the reasons for such a victory, Davit Bakradze, who headed the list of the National Movement, put forward two explanations. The first is that this was due largely to the electoral campaign which his party led and to the policy followed by the government since the reelection of Mikhail Saakashvili. He thinks that the fact that his party was *'concentrated on a resolutely positive campaign, proposing concrete solutions to the real problems of daily life'*¹⁹ constituted the key to success. The other explanation that he advances makes reference to the *'phenomenon of weariness of Opposition voters, who did not deem it useful to go out and support an Opposition in which they no longer believe.'*²⁰

It has to be said that the surprise *'sidelining'* of the chairwoman of the Parliament, Nino Burdjanadze, did not play in favour of the party in power. Disagreeing with the decisions taken during the drawing up of the list of candidates of the outgoing majority, on April 21, 2008 she said that *'despite difficult, serious and long consultations, a consensus could unfortunately not be reached ...I tried to promote in the list of the National Movement new personalities, new faces which, in my opinion, could do a lot of good for our country and could get involved in major reforms and make them more human.'*²¹ Recognised both on the international and on the national level as a key moderator, listening to Georgian society, Nino Burdjanadze always displayed her difference, all the while supporting the successive prime ministers and President Saakashvili. What could appear as a *'warning to the republic'* no doubt conceals a personal calculation in view of the next Presidential election of January 2013.

b. On the side of the Opposition

For their part, the leaders of the Opposition, taken aback by this defeat, have timidly launched an explanation behind which they are entrenched endlessly election after election: electoral fraud. After having vainly tried to mobilise the crowds by calling out their voters as from the evening of the election to gather by the tens of thousands around the sports palace, they had to face up to the evidence that their heart was no longer there.²²

In an interview with the daily *Rezonansi*, Gia Tortladze, of the National Council - United Opposition – New Rights expresses, like an artist after a failed singing tour, his bitterness by attributing his defeat to a public which doesn't understand anything: *'Georgian society is illogical and I do not see what we can expect of it!'*²³ In the same daily, Levan Berdzenishvili, of the Republican Party, attributes this rout to *'the indifference of part of the population and the irrational behaviour of another part of the population.'*²⁴

4. Conclusion

At first view, the conditions seemed to be there to chip away at the supremacy of the outgoing majority. The delicate economic situation, freedom of expression that was dented in November 2007, personal accusations against the President made by some of his former

¹⁹ <http://www.civilgeorgia.ge/eng/article.php?id=18363>

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17643&search>

²² There were not more than 3,000 demonstrators this evening there, most of them having come to watch the retransmission direct onto giant screens of the European Football Cup, Manchester United / Chelsea. Once the goal scoring was over, the demonstrators went home without paying further attention to the speech of the political leaders who were present there.

²³ <http://www.civilgeorgia.ge/eng/article.php?id=18380>

²⁴ Idem.

ministers, a difficult reelection during the first round of the bitterly disputed Presidential election and the political regrouping of nine Opposition parties all seemed to explain the first public opinion polls, which in April²⁵, put the party in power in a delicate position.

The evidence is that the Georgian voters did not linger there. Tension with Russia over Abkhazia and the deployment of additional Russian troops in the days preceding the election definitely aroused a national spirit and served to gather those who were undecided around the outgoing government.²⁶ Delayed joining of NATO²⁷, if this is not pushed back to the Greek calends, was skillfully presented by President Saakashvili as a striking strategic victory in the medium term. The political opposition groups, multiple and variable, could not find a charismatic leader behind whom their personal ambitions could be tamed and who could represent an alternative to Mikhail Saakashvili. The accusations against him were on a long fuse whereas public opinion remembers above all the first steps of the future President in 2003 and his fight against established corruption. His authoritarianism, supposed or real, was felt to be a '*necessary evil*.' The tragic episode of November 2007 was, it would seem, quickly passed over by losses and gains. The hope of seeing the economic destiny of everyone improve in a liberal economy where the macroeconomic indicators are flashing green according to the international organisations has once again prevailed.

Much will depend now on the ability of President Saakashvili to manage this victory and on his attitude in the weeks to come. Will he avoid the pitfalls of an '*unobtainable chamber*' which could, like that of Louis XVIII turn out to be more royalist than the King? ²⁸ The absence of a moderating influence like Nino Burdjanadze may make itself felt cruelly, all the more so as such a quasi-monotone Parliament, will be particularly difficult to channel and to restrain.

Much will also depend on the ability of the Western chancelleries to restrain this young and fiery President whose Western tropism and frenzied Atlanticism we know well. He has everything to lose militarily, politically and on the human front from rushing ahead on the issue of the separatist conflicts. Legally speaking, Georgia is right, but well apart from the movement of troops, well apart from the law and well apart from the Caucasus, an open crisis would put the Westerners and the Russians face to face in a test of strength where the dangers should not be under-estimated.

There we have a potentially very dangerous conflict. At this pace, Russia and NATO, or to put it in other words, Russia, the United States and the European Union will not soon be able to round out the angles without losing face. All sorts of provocations become imaginable and can be envisaged. The international community should prevent them before it can no longer control them. Therefore we should reestablish lines of dialogue, bring together the arguments of all the parties and try to find a compromise. The matter is urgent.

²⁵ A month before the first round of the election, a public opinion poll by the daily Rezonansi gave 21.3% to the Presidential party, 17% to the National Council –United Opposition – New Rights, 6.1% to the Republican Party, 4.6% to the Labour Party and 4.1% to the Christian Democrats.

²⁶ A week before the election, the polling institutes noted a spectacular turn, with the Presidential party at 54% and Opposition coalition at 19%.

²⁷ At the Bucharest summit in April, Georgia and the Ukraine did not get a green light to join the MAP - Membership Action Plan of NATO.

²⁸ One should remember that the adventure of the '*unobtainable chamber*' lasted barely one year and ended with its dissolution on September 5, 1816.