

# **The October 2012 Elections and the Role of Democracy in Georgia's Foreign Policy**

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## Introduction

This paper examines Georgia's foreign policy strategy since the 2003 Rose revolution. It aims to explain why domestic development processes, especially in the field of democratization, have obtained a central role in Georgia's foreign policy as it has evolved since 2003, and how this emphasis on domestic reform as a prerequisite for security has affected Georgia internationally as well as domestically. The paper's main argument is that Georgia's pursuit of foreign policy objectives, primarily integration with the Euro-Atlantic security community and building a strong relationship with the U.S., required a strong emphasis on Georgia's international image as a democratic reformer. As this image increasingly came under question among Georgia's international partners, especially as a consequence of a domestic crisis in November 2007 and the 2008 war with Russia, the Georgian government conducted several reforms of its election system and constitution, arguably in response to international criticism rather than as an outcome of domestic political processes. While these reforms laid the groundwork for a more pluralistic political system in Georgia, they were only partial and were combined with other measures to ensure the continued power of the ruling party. Yet, the close interconnection between Georgia's foreign policy objectives and the country's internal dynamics simultaneously provided a barrier against overt steps in a more authoritarian direction. Finally, the paper argues that the outcome of Georgia's parliamentary elections in October 2012 should be understood in this perspective. In spite of a pre-election environment slanted in favor of the ruling party, the fact that the elections themselves were free and fair enough to allow for the opposition's victory is attributable to the ruling party's perceived need to maintain Georgia's international image as a democratic reformer.

## The October 2012 Elections

Georgia's parliamentary elections on October 1, 2012, and the unexpected victory of the opposition coalition Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia drew considerable international attention. Much like other Georgian elections in recent years, the October polls were ascribed the properties of a “litmus test” for Georgia's trajectory as a progressive reformer and a prospective member of the Euro–Atlantic community. Yet, these elections held special importance as they constitute the potential first step toward a peaceful transfer of power in the history of this small South Caucasian state since independence, establishing the balance of power between political forces in the country ahead of the 2013 presidential elections and subsequent constitutional changes that will transfer much political power from the president to the prime minister and parliament.

While most Georgia-watchers had limited their expectations for a best-case scenario to election conduct that would meet international standards for free and fair elections (it was far from clear that they would) and hence provide for a legitimate transfer of power within the ruling party, the opposition's victory threw most previous estimations on their head. The fact that today's Georgia is a country where the opposition is capable of winning an election – and where the leaders of the former ruling party United National Movement are prepared to concede defeat – makes Georgia stand out in comparison to all its neighbors and most other states across the post-Soviet space, with the exception of the Baltic States.

The significance of the election outcome – and the degree of attention the elections have received internationally – must be understood in the context of Georgia's foreign policy strategy as it has evolved since the 2003 Rose revolution. The Georgian government's forging of a foreign policy whose credibility to a very large extent rested on domestic developments and democratization in the country has played a crucial role in the processes eventually leading up to the election results.

## The Evolution of Georgia's Foreign Policy

Georgia's attempt to move closer to the western hemisphere was by no means a novelty to the Government of Mikheil Saakashvili, ascending to power through the Rose revolution in 2003. Under the previous rule of Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia had made several overtures toward the west, aimed at establishing closer relations with especially the U.S. Throughout the 1990s, Shevardnadze enjoyed considerable credibility with western counterparts, not least due to his role in the reunification of Germany and the dismantling of the Warsaw pact as Soviet foreign minister.

Georgia's relatively pluralistic political system provided the country with a certain status in the eyes of western interlocutors. Western interest in Georgia's trajectory and engagement with the country evolved gradually in the 1990s and early 2000s, and Georgia received considerable amounts of development aid from the U.S. as well as the EU. The U.S. took part in training and equipping the Georgian armed forces in a program aimed at defusing a conflict with Russia over the presence of Chechen fighters on Georgian territory in 2002-2003, and Georgia's decision to commit a small contingent to Iraq in 2003 was taken during Shevardnadze's final year in power. The country's strategic location was underlined by its participation as a transit country in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines transporting Caspian hydrocarbons from Azerbaijan to Turkey outside the Russian pipeline network.

Yet, while Georgia under Shevardnadze occasionally floated the idea that Georgia should pursue closer integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, most prominently NATO, as a means for escaping the Russian orbit, the weakness of the Georgian state remained a considerable obstacle to any such ambitions throughout Shevardnadze's tenure. Georgia's economy and state structures had never quite recovered from its chaotic road to independence in the early 1990s, marked by three consecutive civil wars in South Ossetia, Tbilisi and Abkhazia. In 2003, Georgia featured corruption levels on par with Angola and Cameroon, comparable only to Azerbaijan and

Tajikistan among fellow post-Soviet states.<sup>1</sup> An enormous shadow economy and a strong collusion between organized criminal groups and Georgian state structures provided for a state that was incapable of providing the most basic public goods for its citizens, let alone pursue the considerable reform efforts required to credibly pose as a candidate for membership in western institutions.

The Rose revolution in November 2003 and the subsequent ascendance to power of the “young reformers”, a group of young and western-educated politicians who had previously served in Shevardnadze’s government, provided for new optimism, domestically in Georgia as well as among its international partners, that the country would prove capable of finally embarking on a path toward transition and modernization. Such hopes rapidly seemed to be vindicated, as the new government under President Mikheil Saakashvili undertook a series of drastic reforms of Georgia’s state structures and economy.

The new government also embarked on a decisive westward orientation of Georgia’s foreign policy, declaring that Georgia would actively seek membership in the EU and NATO. The effort was decisively directed toward establishing a closer relationship with the U.S., including a drastic increase of the Georgian contingent in Iraq and an additional contribution to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. However, the government also seemed well aware that its recognition in the west rested on its ability to demonstrate progress at home. Saakashvili and members of his government embarked on a series of visits to western capitals, where they asserted Georgia’s commitment to reform and democratization.

The Georgian foreign policy strategy evolving during this period must be understood in the broader international context provided by the U.S. Freedom Agenda. The assertion that the Islamic fundamentalism that produced al Qaeda and other terrorist

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<sup>1</sup> Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2003*,  
[http://archive.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2003](http://archive.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2003)

organizations was an effect of authoritarian regimes in weak states provided for an increasing U.S. focus on the mode of governance in foreign states after 9/11. The Freedom Agenda was especially actualized after the failure to retrieve WMDs in Iraq led the Bush administration to increasingly frame the operation in terms of nation building and democratization.<sup>2</sup> As the U.S. government increasingly subscribed to the idea that the U.S. should utilize its hegemonic power position in the post-Cold War world to promote “a balance of power that favors freedom”,<sup>3</sup> a tendency can be observed in the Bush administration’s foreign policy narrative to describe events such as the 2003-2005 “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space as interrelated with U.S. policies in the Middle East through the imagery of a global wave of democratization for which the U.S. could partly take credit.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that Georgia’s Rose revolution occurred simultaneously with this reformulation of the U.S. role in the world provided for a drastic improvement of Georgia’s relations with the U.S. Shortly after his inauguration as president, Saakashvili was received in Washington, DC where President Bush lauded Georgia’s reforms and highlighted that the two presidents shared fundamental “values”.<sup>5</sup> Georgia quickly qualified for a compact worth US\$ 295.3<sup>6</sup> million with the Millennium Challenge Account, the U.S. government’s flagship development initiative, aimed at promoting effective governance in a selected group of progressive developing countries. If the Rose revolution in itself provided for a drastic improvement of Georgia’s international image, developments in the country gained considerable importance as the subsequent Orange and Tulip revolutions in Ukraine

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Carothers (2007) *Democracy Promotion During and After Bush*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. George W. Bush, “Address at United Nations Plenary Meeting”, New York, September 14, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush Welcomes Georgian President Saakashvili to White House”, Washington, DC, February 25, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The funds were increased to US\$ 395.3 million in November 2008, after the war.



and Kyrgyzstan unfolded in late 2004 and spring 2005. In the U.S. perspective, these developments in the post-Soviet space fit perfectly with the notion of a global wave of democratization, and were frequently recounted as examples of the worldwide strides taken toward democracy under the U.S. watch.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the Rose revolution preceded these developments, and because at least in the Orange revolution the case could be made for a spillover between developments in the two countries,<sup>8</sup> provided Georgia with an increased significance in U.S. foreign policy. In an unprecedented act of support for the Georgian government, President Bush visited Tbilisi in May 2005, where he termed Georgia a “beacon of liberty”<sup>9</sup> whose example provided an inspiration to democratic reformers worldwide. Hence, the U.S. government ascribed an important role to Georgia in the international promotion of the Freedom Agenda. While Georgia’s importance in this respect was naturally limited in comparison to the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the country nevertheless attracted a high degree of U.S. attention that was motivated more by its potential as a poster child of democratization and reform than its geopolitical significance or contributions as a military ally.

The Georgian government took stock of this newfound international significance and in the years following the revolution embarked on promoting a narrative about developments in Georgia in various international settings that in principle echoed the assertions of the Freedom Agenda. Considerable sums spent on lobbying firms in Washington, DC (and to a lesser extent in Brussels) helped reinforcing Georgia’s international image with U.S. and European political circles. This strategy on part of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks at the Community of Democracies Opening Plenary”, April 28, 2005; George W. Bush, “Address to the United Nations”, New York, September 25, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Activists of the Georgian youth movement Khmara provided advice and training for their counterparts in the Ukrainian Pora movement. In turn, Khmara had obtained corresponding support from activists of the Serbian Otpor movement, which had been instrumental in the 2000 ouster of Slobodan Milosevic. George Soros’ Open Society Foundation funded and facilitated contacts between these groups.

<sup>9</sup> George W. Bush, “President Addresses and Thanks Citizens of Tbilisi, Georgia”, May 10, 2005.

the Georgian government contributed to making Georgia's capacity for reform and its domestic mode of governance a key component of its foreign policy, where credible progress in the former was made a precondition for the international security objectives of the latter.

In combination with an increasingly assertive Russian international posture in the mid-2000s, Georgia's decisively western-oriented foreign policy and its zealous effort to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia – regions that had separated from Georgia in the early 1990s and attained de facto independence with strong Russian support – rapidly put Georgia's relationship with its large northern neighbor in a downward spiral. The Georgian leadership viewed progress in its integration with NATO as a key deterrent against what it viewed as Russia's increasingly imperialistic foreign policy, while Russia viewed the prospect of Georgian (and even more so Ukrainian) membership in NATO as western encroachments on its "spheres of privileged interest", as it was later termed by President Medvedev,<sup>10</sup> that needed to be stopped. Throughout Saakashvili's tenure as president, much of the image-building dimension of Georgia's foreign policy activity can be understood as an effort to build the country's credibility as a prospective NATO member.

## **Credibility Crises for the “Beacon of Liberty” Narrative: November 2007 and August 2008**

The foreign policy narrative communicated by Georgian officials internationally in the period 2004-2007 holds that Georgia is a consolidated democracy with a progressive and reform-oriented government committed to rapid reform, and which is entitled to a place in the Euro-Atlantic community.<sup>11</sup> The prospect of a successful transition in the volatile Caucasus region on the fringes of Europe, and the attached

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Clover, "Russia announces 'spheres of interest'," *Financial Times*, August 31, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> C.f. Lincoln Mitchell (2009) "Georgia's Story: Competing Narratives since the War," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 51: 4, 87-100.

possibility of further enlargements of the European security architecture, served to draw significant international attention to developments in Georgia. Indeed, the country managed to display considerable progress especially in the first years following the Rose revolution. Economic reforms in line with strongly libertarian principles reduced previous obstacles to foreign investment. A ruthless effort to combat corruption, including forced repayments of money allegedly stolen from the state on the part of former government officials under the threat of imprisonment, served to drastically limit corruption levels in the country. One of the flagship reforms was the overhaul of the patrol police, which made redundant approximately 16,000 police officers and replaced them with a smaller force of young and professional officers. Achievements such as the above awarded Georgia rapidly rising scores in prestigious international indexes such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, and constituted considerable successes for a country that only a few years earlier had been considered a hopeless example of a failing state.

However, while these achievements awarded Georgia international recognition and respect, concerns were also increasingly voiced regarding the democratic situation in the country, which did not demonstrate comparable progress. In fact, constitutional changes introduced immediately after Saakashvili's inauguration concentrated power with the president, while the government's control of the broadcast media and its ability to deter businesses from supporting other political forces than the ruling party provided for a political climate with significant barriers to the emergence of any meaningful opposition. Coupled with a marked tendency to prioritize the pace of reform over respect for the rule of law and property rights, these features of Georgia's domestic politics drew critique mainly from west European counterparts.

Georgia's international image suffered a serious blow in November 2007, as Georgian authorities violently suppressed an opposition demonstration in Tbilisi, closed down the opposition's main media outlet, Imedi TV, and introduced a week-long state of emergency in the country. If the previous reservations against the image Georgia

sought to present of itself had amounted to minor problems that could be excused by the importance of moving rapidly with reform and would be resolved over time, the internationally televised images of police using truncheons, rubber bullets and water cannons on protesters conveyed an unflattering picture of the way Georgia's democracy was evolving. While Saakashvili sought to repair the damage by resigning as president and calling new elections for January 2008, the events had a lasting impact on the perceptions of Georgia and its future trajectory, most significantly in crucial NATO members France and Germany. The subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections in January and May 2008 drew heavy attention as tests of the government's observation of democratic principles. While international observers representing OSCE-ODIHR considered both elections to be largely in line with international standards, observed irregularities especially in the presidential elections did little to reassure the skeptics.<sup>12</sup>

The second significant crisis for Georgia's international image came in August 2008 and the war with Russia. The reasons for the war can be considered as a clash between increasingly assertive Russian policies to retain a degree of control over developments and international alignments of states in its neighborhood, and the emergence of a stronger Georgian state simultaneously seeking to establish its independence vis-à-vis Russia and make an uncompromising push to revise the realities on the ground established in the early 1990s. Several observers have cited indications that the Russian invasion of Georgia was a preplanned attack aimed at foiling Georgia's NATO ambitions and undermining or even forcibly replacing the

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<sup>12</sup> See OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Georgia: Extraordinary Presidential Election, 5 January 2008, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/30959>) and "Georgia: Parliamentary Elections, 21 May 2008, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/33301>).

Georgian government.<sup>13</sup> The course of fighting during the war, which quickly came to comprise not only a Russian incursion into South Ossetia but also a penetration deep into uncontested Georgian territory and Russian support for Abkhazia's offensive to gain control over Georgian-controlled parts of the region, also suggest that the Russian intervention had much broader purposes than simply protecting Russian citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia – which Presidents Medvedev and Putin have both later publicly admitted.<sup>14</sup> While Russia has claimed that the South Ossetian side acted independently in its contribution to the escalating tensions, the extensive Russian clout over South Ossetia's de facto government, not least through the direct appointment of several former Russian officials to posts in South Ossetia's power ministries, makes this assertion highly questionable and reinforces the argument that Russia likely actively sought to bait Georgia into attacking, and later used Georgia's initiation of hostilities as a pretext for invading the country.

However, Georgia's responsibility for the initiation of large-scale hostilities cannot be overlooked and had severe consequences for Georgia's credibility as a future NATO member. While the Georgian incursion into South Ossetia came after weeks of increasingly intense exchanges of fire between Georgian forces and South Ossetian paramilitaries and a case could probably have been made for the need to protect Georgian villages along the ceasefire line, Georgia's launch of an artillery barrage on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali was certainly an excessive use of force under the circumstances, as was later pointed out by a comprehensive EU-backed fact

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<sup>13</sup> See Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Eds.) (2009) *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe); Ronald Asmus (2009) *A Little War that Shook the World: Russia, Georgia, and the Future of the West* (Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g. Brian Whitmore, "Medvedev Gets Caught Telling the Truth," *RFE/RL*, 22 November, 2011. ([http://www.rferl.org/content/medvedev\\_gets\\_caught\\_telling\\_the\\_truth/24399004.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/medvedev_gets_caught_telling_the_truth/24399004.html)); Pavel Felgenhauer, "Putin Confirms the Invasion of Georgia was Preplanned", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 9, 2012. ([http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=39746&cHash=177fd31d57370a96ac7da644dc280014](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39746&cHash=177fd31d57370a96ac7da644dc280014))

finding mission.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Georgian side's uncompromising and often aggressive stances toward the breakaway regions in the years and months preceding the war framed the conflicts exclusively as a bilateral issue between Georgia and Russia and did little to address the deeper causes of these conflicts and the grievances of Abkhaz and Ossetians.

Georgia's actions during the war had severe consequences for its image in the west. Aside from conveying the perception that positive steps were underway toward democratization in the country, another key feature of Georgia's image was its commitment to the peaceful resolution of its internal conflicts. The maintenance of such a perception in the west was crucial, not least in the perspective of Georgia's NATO integration – since a view of Georgia as aggressive and potentially violent in its approaches to its internal conflicts and Russia would make it unreliable as a future NATO member. As information transpired regarding the questionable Georgian actions at the outset of hostilities, the country's prospects for convincing the already skeptic European NATO members, particularly Germany and France, of the benefits of granting Georgia a membership perspective dwindled. Instead, the war left the remaining perceptions of Georgia either as a country ruled by an irresponsible and impulsive elite incapable of taking well-informed decisions based on intelligence and unwittingly walking into a trap set by Russia, or as an aggressor covertly duping the west into believing in its peaceful intentions while grossly overestimating the levels of support it would obtain from the U.S. in the event of an armed conflict with Russia, depending on perspective. Regardless of which, the war did considerable damage to Georgia's image in Europe, and in U.S. decision-making circles.

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<sup>15</sup> See Heidi Tagliavini et. al. (2009) *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, the Council of the European Union.

## Georgia Adapts to Foreign Expectations

Georgia's responses to these crises clearly indicate the importance the Georgian government attached to the country's democratic image, as well as the stakes involved for the U.S. in the country's ability to retain this image. Leaked cables from the U.S. embassy in Tbilisi during this period indicate an intense involvement on the part of ranking U.S. diplomats both in the resolution of the November crisis and in attempts to refurbish Georgia's democratic image in its aftermath. These issues are explicitly discussed in terms of how Georgia is perceived internationally, especially with a view to sway the skeptical Germany and France into supporting a Georgian MAP with NATO.<sup>16</sup> After the November 2007 crisis, the presidential and parliamentary elections respectively held in January and May 2008 were considered opportunities to reinstate the positive message of democratization in Georgia.

After the irregularities occurring during the presidential elections, changes were made to the election code ahead of the parliamentary elections to provide increased transparency and opposition oversight over the voting and tabulation process, largely in accordance with advice provided by U.S. interlocutors. In speeches Saakashvili gave internationally after his victory in the presidential elections, he adapted the rhetoric about democracy in Georgia, which was previously presented as an accomplished fact following the revolution, to a narrative of transition where Georgia was termed an "*emerging democracy*," which "*remains a dynamic work in progress ... While our progress in building lasting democratic and electoral institutions is very real, these past several months have highlighted how much further we need to go.*"<sup>17</sup> He also increasingly started to discuss democratization in speeches given in a domestic setting, otherwise a rare topic before the November crisis.

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g. leaked U.S. embassy cables PARIS002725; TBILISI002813; TBILISI000179, available at [cablegatesearch.net](http://cablegatesearch.net).

<sup>17</sup> Mikheil Saakashvili, "Remarks To the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe," January 24, 2008.

These changes to the official rhetoric and the revisions of the election code – in large part in line with opposition demands – can be considered minor adaptations in order to sway international critics and calm the domestic opposition. The government simultaneously increased its dominance of broadcast media by reintroducing Imedi TV with a decisively pro-government slant in its reporting. However, the changes also represent a tendency toward official recognition of Georgia’s democratization problem and incremental reforms that, while not addressing the structural barriers to increased political pluralism in the country, still represent small steps toward including the political opposition in political processes. While it is difficult to separate out a specific factor as a cause of such decision making, the need for maintaining Georgia’s international image seems to have played an important role. In fact, the commonly held view among Georgia-observers that the government implemented minor reforms in order to save face while simultaneously avoiding concessions that would imply a serious challenge to its power, actually reinforces the argument that these reforms were primarily made with the country’s international image in mind. The changes were, however, far from satisfactory to the country’s political opposition, the more radical elements of which continued to engage in perennial protest actions, most notably in April 2009.

After the war, the Georgian government became even more focused on democracy as a key feature of its foreign relations. Immediately following the conclusion of immediate hostilities, Saakashvili announced at the UN General Assembly that Georgia would respond to Russian aggression with “greater openness” in what he terms a “second Rose revolution”.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the reforms were announced in the immediate aftermath of the war and as a response to Russian aggression indicates their importance as reassurance to Georgia’s international partners. The redoubled effort to communicate the country’s democratic nature was seemingly reinforced by the considerable international critique of Georgia’s actions during the war and the

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<sup>18</sup> Mikheil Saakashvili, “H.E. MR. MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI, PRESIDENT OF GEORGIA. 63rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” September 23, 2008.



debates on the distribution of guilt in its aftermath. In this perspective, it became crucial for the Georgian government to promote a narrative of a Russian invasion of a neighbor that was not only smaller and western-oriented, but also democratic.

In the aftermath of the war, little progress was made regarding several of the promised reforms, especially regarding the independence of the judiciary and diversity in the broadcast media landscape. The election code was reformed again ahead of the May 2010 municipal elections, which according to the OSCE-ODIHR international observers displayed progress in comparison to previous elections but suffered from the remaining problem of an unlevel playing field decisively favoring the ruling party.<sup>19</sup> However, the most tangible and significant outcome of the “second Rose revolution” was a series of constitutional amendments, developed in cooperation with opposition representatives and approved by the Georgian parliament in October 2010. The amendments will transfer many of the powers currently resting with the president to the Prime Minister and parliament and provides the constitutional groundwork for a parliamentary system. The fact that they enter into force following the 2013 presidential elections explains the tremendous importance of the 2012 parliamentary elections.

The Georgian government’s motives for setting this process into motion have frequently been described as attempts to control political change through machinations geared toward maintaining power in a political system perceived as more legitimate domestically as well as internationally. It has been argued that the new system would have provided a possibility for Saakashvili to continue ruling as Prime Minister, following the example of President Putin at the expiration of his second term as president. Yet, considering the damage such a move would do to Georgia’s international image, a more probable scenario is that the constitutional changes were introduced with the perspective of transferring power to a successor

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<sup>19</sup> See OSCE/ODIHR, “Georgia: Municipal Elections, 30 May, 2010, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Report,” September 2010. (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/71280>)

within the ruling party, with former Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, who was appointed Prime Minister shortly before the October elections, as a likely candidate.

## **Elections and the Future of Georgia's Image**

The steps toward democratization that Georgia has taken after the Rose revolution have been ambiguous and often coupled with reverse tendencies. The country's political system has been classified as a hybrid regime, a political system that "combines democratic and non-democratic characteristics"<sup>20</sup> or even as a case of "competitive authoritarianism" as suggested by Levitsky and Way.<sup>21</sup> The ruling elite have primarily perceived themselves as modernizers and Saakashvili himself has quoted role models like Kemal Ataturk and David Ben Gurion – leaders primarily known for their legacies of state building rather than democratization. While the Georgian modernization project, and especially its inherent conception of belonging to Europe, implies that democratization is logically a component of Georgia's modernization, democracy has hardly been the priority of the Saakashvili government judging from its track record.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, the fact that the Georgian government has since the Rose revolution continually adhered rhetorically to democratic principles in international settings is testimony to the importance it has attached to international perceptions of the country. As demonstrated above, events inviting closer international scrutiny and critique of the democratic situation in Georgia have unfailingly induced the government to redouble its efforts to promote its democratic image and also to introduce certain reforms towards a more pluralistic political system. The steps taken toward democratization

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<sup>20</sup> See Joakim Ekman (2009) "Political Participation and Regime Stability: A Framework for Analyzing Hybrid Regimes", *International Political Science Review* 30: 1, 7-31.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>22</sup> C.f. Vicken Cheterian, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: Change or Repetition? Tension Between State-Building and Modernization Projects," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 36, no. 4, 2008: 689-712.

under Saakashvili's tenure, though relatively few, have arguably been taken in response to international critique rather than as means for appeasing the domestic opposition, which has remained a weak albeit vocal political force practically until the last year of UNM rule. These observations suggest that a key motivation for adhering to certain democratic principles, such as acceptable conduct during elections or outreach to the opposition in the design of electoral and constitutional reform, is the existence of strong international expectations for Georgia's democratic conduct. Such expectations, which clearly stem from Georgia's foreign policy narrative following the Rose revolution, have arguably also helped convince the Georgian government of the peril in reverting to a more authoritarian mode of governance in times of crisis and in the face of perceived internal and external threats, as was certainly the case in the aftermath of the November 2007 crisis.

The outcome of the October 2012 elections can also partly be understood as an effect of this dynamic between domestic development processes and international expectations. While Georgia has remained an important U.S. ally in the region, the U.S. interest in, and support for Georgia have been markedly less pronounced under the Obama administration than under President Bush. The Obama administration has nevertheless retained and even reinforced the conditionality of continued U.S. support for Georgia to progress in democratization. Ahead of the October 2012 elections senior U.S. officials explicitly tied the free and fair conduct of the October parliamentary elections, and a subsequent constitutional transfer of power in Georgia, to Georgia's future in the Euro-Atlantic community.<sup>23</sup> Such expectations did not prevent the Georgian government from applying several levers to prevent the emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili as a potent and unifying force for the opposition,

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<sup>23</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at Omnibus Session of the Strategic Partnership Commission, Batumi, Georgia, June 5, 2012; see also Thomas O. Melia, "Press Conference with Deputy Assistant Secretary Melia Pre-elections in Georgia", Tbilisi, Georgia, September 14, 2012. (<http://www.humanrights.gov/2012/09/14/press-conference-with-deputy-assistant-secretary-melia-pre-elections-in-georgia/>).

including revoking his Georgian citizenship, imposing disproportionate fines on him and his associates for allegedly breaching campaign funding laws, and in some cases intimidating his supporters. Ivanishvili's personal fortune equals half of Georgia's GDP and he did not shy from using this wealth to mount a comprehensive campaign across Georgia and also spent considerable sums on lobbying in especially Washington, DC to counter the government's own lobbying efforts – a campaign that made a point of attacking the government exactly for its poor track record in democratization domestically in Georgia as well as to a U.S. political audience.

However, in spite of the emergence of a serious challenger to the UNM for the first time since its ascent to power, the Georgian government oversaw an election that it actually lost, implying that the massive election fraud many observers had anticipated ahead of the elections did not take place. While the results seem to have surprised the Georgian government and opposition alike, Saakashvili's concession of defeat and the initial pledges of both sides to cooperate in bringing about a peaceful transition of power constituted positive signals of an unanticipated maturity on part of Georgia's political actors that was extremely well received internationally.

Indeed, the outcome of the parliamentary elections could theoretically constitute the first step in establishing a parliamentary system of governance and a genuinely pluralistic party system, since the UNM retains a substantial minority in the new parliament. Such a development would radically strengthen Georgia's argument for future inclusion into Euro-Atlantic organizations such as NATO. However, as this paper is being finalized, the new ruling coalition is embarking on a series of arrests of former government officials, implying that it may simply seek to establish itself as the new monopolistic party of power in Georgia. Georgia's international future hence hangs in the balance: the country can either demonstrate that democratic transition is still a possibility and hence reinforce the country's international status, or it can revert into yet another round of competitive authoritarianism.

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