The 1 October 2012 elections in Georgia what happened; what did not happen; what will happen

On 1 October 2012, Georgia passed a democratic benchmark, that is, a peaceful transfer of power. Alas, this victory has been stained by the insistence of the outgoing administration to portray the electoral result as Moscow’s victory over the West. This is wrong and making this claim does not serve Georgia’s national interests, or indeed its democratic consolidation.

What happened in October?

Early on in the campaign the President stripped his main opponent and current Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvilli, of his citizenship. Public servants were fired from their posts by virtue of association with the opposition. The Constitution was revised to ensure that Georgia would be turned into a parliamentary system where the office of the Prime Minister would replace the office of the President as the center of the executive, mainly because the incumbent President does not have the right to run for a third term. The President declined a public debate with his main opponent. And of course, the government attempted to fall hard on the opposition’s finances. Nonetheless, the opposition stayed its course, within the constitutionally delineated limits.

Elections did come, the incumbent government lost, in spite of certain irregularities in the procedure. And the President did concede defeat. Despite the aforementioned abnormalities in the electoral process, President Saakashvili, under heavy international pressure, became the first post-independence executive to lose a general election. Georgia has so far experienced three extra-constitutional transfers of power and for decades it did not have a democratic regime, that is, if one defines democracy as the system where the incumbent can lose elections. If President Saakashvili remains the leader of the opposition and Georgia acquires a normal bipolar...
(or even multi-polar) party system, this too will constitute a democratic milestone.

Nonetheless, it should be made clear that the domestic political landscape remains volatile. On the one hand, the UNM (United National Movement) party that has ‘conceded defeat’ does not recognize the newly emerged government as legitimate or patriotic. Time and again, President Saakashvili insists that his loss was Moscow’s victory rather than simply his loss. This claim does not resonate with reality.

What did not happen in October?

There is a recurrent suggestion that all states in the South Caucasus have their own ‘mentor state.’ Clearly, capacity-building in Georgia has been spearheaded through funding and direct know-how transfer primarily from the United States (US) and to a lesser extent Europe. Hence, Georgia’s relationship with the US is and will remain ‘special’ in many ways. Russia is still in the picture, with social, economic and cultural relations that have lasted for decades, if not centuries. But, since 1989, Georgia has been largely founded on a pool of leaders and functionaries whose education, upbringing, values and political orientation have clearly had a westward outlook. In Georgia, unlike Ukraine, Moldova or Armenia, to be western leaning is nearly a cultural trait. This is not likely to change. What will change is the rhetoric.

During the term of the previous administration there was a climax in pro-Atlantic rhetoric high on adrenaline and low on substance. The previous government dwelled on a language common to some Washington neocon circles, where individual leaders and parties in the region were expected to wear either a black pro-Russian hat or a white pro-Atlantic/European one. Hence, the UNM and Mikheil Saakashvili were drawing a picture of Georgia as the ‘New Berlin Wall.’ This neat ‘east versus west’ paradigm, explicitly drawing from Cold War rhetoric, had two outcomes:

- On the one hand, it sought to legitimize a heavy handed approach in domestic politics and the UNM’s solid grasp on the state; in this context, the basic argument was that ‘the ends justify the means.’
- On the other hand, this rhetoric placed the Georgian loss of sovereignty in the context of a ‘greater picture,’ imbibing it with meaning, as if the Georgian people were martyrs in a crusade fought in the name of the ‘Euro-Atlantic community.’

Of course these were just words. One needs not dwell upon extracts drawn from the memoirs of Condoleezza Rice, the former US Secretary of State, in order to argue that in 2008 Tbilisi and Washington were engaged in the ‘misunderstanding of the century.’ The Atlantic community proved – beyond a shadow of a doubt – that none of Georgia’s allies is willing to be drawn into a conflict that could easily escalate into something much larger than a regional affair. Joining the Partnership for Peace program is a significant statement. Sending troops to Afghanistan is more than a statement. But, as several case studies in the region indicate, this program is not the lobby to NATO membership. Georgia cannot continue to go from NATO summit to NATO summit making threats its allies are not willing to deliver upon. It is clear that Georgia’s dispute with Russia will never boil down to an evocation of Article V. In fact, as long as article V is on the table, it is unlikely that Georgia – or Moldova, Azerbaijan, or Ukraine for that matter – will ever be invited to become full members of the alliance. Does this mean that Georgia has to cross over to Russia in order to restore its sovereignty? No!
What happens now?

**Georgia will remain western leaning, but will also emerge as region aware.** This means refraining from provoking Russia, especially since the South Caucasus is currently not a high priority in the strategic agenda of the West. Perhaps, it also means that Georgia must find regionally grounded policies that reach out to Moscow by gaining some confidence. It also implies talking directly to the Abkhazians and the Ossetians, and trying to contribute to the rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In other words, this entails becoming a constructive force that engages more in status quo management rather than delivering empty ‘either or’ threats. This does not mean going down the road of satellization.

‘Wearing the black hat’ is not what the new administration and Prime Minister Ivanishvili desire. This position would not resonate with any political party or social movement in Georgia. However, what would make perfect sense is focusing on symbolically unloading Tbilisi’s relationship with Moscow in the context of a broader ‘reset’ that Vice President Biden has spoken of. Georgia no longer wishes to be a symbol of a conflict that is not taking place. As for the cause of democracy, this is a crusade that Georgia must first take up on the home front before it takes on greater global challenges in the name of ‘western civilization.’ A bit of humility is in order. Not only is the Cold War over, but Europe at large is in crisis.

Milestones are made by small victories that are not triumphantly pressed upon the defeated party. The new administration abstained from ‘the way of the street;’ it has shown moderation and has refrained from the politically attractive notion of ‘lustration.’ The public prosecutor has taken the lead in some level of institutional ‘housecleaning’ but only when this had to do with gross human rights violations (i.e. torture, politically motivated crime, etc.) and where there is evidence of gross financial embezzlement. There is no sign of vindictiveness and this is not due to magnanimity alone. **These elections were not about electing ‘a different government,’ they were all about obtaining ‘a different kind of government.’** Georgia needs to have a government that is elected and, potentially, defeated in a popular election. The country needs to have a Constitution that sets the rules, rather than serve as an instrument to change the rules in the service of the incumbent.

This means keeping all political forces engaged. It implies keeping the Constitution unchanged and fighting for bills in the parliament the way normal political systems do. To follow through with this objective requires that the Georgian political forces and their supporters remain responsible and everyone takes the time to make informed, moderate and sober decisions. In part, international monitoring made the October 2012 milestone possible. To consolidate this victory as a political system Georgia must henceforth be able to rely on similar monitoring, both at home and abroad, to ensure that all parties remain committed to democratic competition. **These elections were won in the ballot box; we should expect nothing less of the next elections.** Until that time comes, the government should govern and the opposition should oppose.

Towards this end, the UNM should acquire a domestic agenda. Foreign policy needs to be discussed – taking note of the existing cleavages – with the assumption that no one is a traitor.
All serve the Georgian state to the best of their capacity. Let us think the unthinkable: those whose views differ are no traitors!