Georgia's Road to NATO: November 7 to January 5
By Salome Salukvadze

Five months before the NATO Bucharest Summit in April, the discussions about Georgia’s prospect mushroomed. How is Georgia doing on performance-based preconditions for membership? Does Georgia’s performance merit a Membership Action Plan, which, by the way, is yet another reform program giving chance to Georgia for further development. Or, maybe the whole thing is not only about Georgia’s performance and there is the political context which should be also taken into account, in which Russia plays the main part.

Democratic development and judiciary reforms are among the most important. In November 2006, the Riga Summit Declaration welcomed Georgia’s contribution to international peacekeeping and security operations; encouraged Georgia to continue progress on political, economic and military reforms, and summoned Georgia to strengthen judicial reform. After a year, in November, the mass gatherings in front of the Parliament Building were dispersed by the Interior Ministry Forces, followed by the shattering of the broadcasting company Imedi. The November events were viewed as a bump in the road by some analysts, and as a roadblock by more skeptical ones. Indeed, five months before the Summit, at which Georgia hoped to get MAP, smashing the mass gathering and closing down the broadcasting company could not be regarded as proper behavior from Georgian government.

The question marks that arose about Georgia’s democratic development and its readiness to manage crisis proportionally increased question marks on Georgia’s prospects at Bucharest. The MOD First Deputy Minister, Batu Kutelia noted in a GSAC interview that what has not changed is Georgia’s aspiration toward NATO, its dedication toward conducting extensive reforms and matching all the criteria necessary for becoming a member of the Euro-Atlantic community.

The upcoming elections are a good chance for Georgia to provide solid political feedback to questions about free media and a fair possibility for opposition to conduct an electoral process. According to the Deputy Minister, the tough reaction of the allies after November 7, when the turmoil happened, was principally due to the lack of adequate information about Georgia’s domestic politics, political spectrum or Russian involvement in Georgia’s domestic politics. These events were a test and a challenge to Georgia’s democracy and the January 5 elections will show the final outcome. Every government that is in power has the responsibility to sacrifice its popular image to the country’s needs, thus the Georgian Government took a right decision on November 7.
As for Georgia’s image, as the Deputy Minister put it, everybody admits Georgia has made significant progress and has turned from a failed state into a state with huge economic boost, on track to euro-Atlantic integration. Though there may be some skepticism about the particular timing of Bucharest for Georgia, it is a more tactical question. The strategic choice remains unaltered. If Georgia does not get MAP in Bucharest, the reasons for that will be the same as they used to be before November – mainly linked to the Russian Federation and bilateral relations of some NATO member countries with Russia. The Head of the NATO Information Center, Nanuka Jorjoliani, also agrees with the idea that several countries in NATO do not feel quite happy about the idea of receiving Georgia in the alliance. Those countries, according to Jorjoliani, would have a nice argument to wait for the elections and see how the country would handle them. “I think now we have a great chance to conduct elections and rhetorically disarm these countries. I am quite optimistic because I am absolutely sure that the elections will be handled very well. So, I’m first waiting for the elections and only then for the Bucharest Summit,” Jorjoliani said.

According to Kutelia, November events indeed may have given those countries an additional excuse not to vote for Georgia’s getting MAP at Bucharest, but the main motivations remain the same, being particularly economic and energy interests linked with Russia. “Though, if one has a close look at international dynamics, one may see that the Russian elections were unanimously assessed as undemocratic. This should seriously affect the position of democratic western countries in terms of their relations with Russia and indirectly their position toward Georgia. Georgia has fully aligned itself with the democratic part of the globe, and NATO, being a value-based organization, should take it into account,” Kutelia said.

Nanuka Jorjoliani believes that it was not so much November 7 that the West may have not liked, but about the measures taken against media. “I really don’t think that France may be surprised by dismantling raids, or say, Germany. By the way, this latter was a NATO member already when its special forces broke into an influential newspaper and arrested the editor, for the mere reason that he bitterly remarked on military issues. Nonetheless the measures taken against media deserve my criticism as well,” Jorjoliani said. According to Jorjoliani, demands about ousting of the government were heard on Imedi. “We have surprised the West with the measures taken against the TV channel, notwithstanding the fact that TV channel’s recent broadcasting was far from being impartial. I think this should be subject to investigation,” she concluded.

Shota Utiashvili, Head of Analytical Department of Georgian Ministry of Interior told GSAC, “I would say that the risk of the coup d’état being planned was very high in November. Of course most of the people were driven there by their problems and they were neither Russia’s agents nor supported Patarkatsishvili, but some exterior forces, as well as some destructive internal ones, were trying to use people’s just discontent for their own purpose, and they nearly reached their goal. It nearly resulted in the armed clash on the city’s main avenue. The situation was really tense and if the Government had not used all the legitimate means it had, we would likely have had to deal with the uncontrolled processes. I think Georgia’s Government acted correctly and I think any other government, in this situation, would act the same way.”
Though giving MAP to Georgia is a political decision, that NATO member countries should make, Georgia will find itself in a better position if its performance deserves less criticism. According to Jorjoliani, judiciary reform in Georgia is not only desirable, but essential. The Georgian Government often refers to the fact that it was the Georgian side who insisted on putting this issue in the IPAP, but taking the obligation and actually fulfilling it are two different things. “Judiciary reform is a badly wrapped box with absolute emptiness in it. I’m waiting more for this reform even more than I’m waiting for the elections. I’m waiting for reforms in the penal system. I’m waiting for prisons being built not for the purpose of being filled but to move prisoners to better conditions.” Georgia often focuses on the argument of successful MOD reform, Ministry of Interior reform, education reform and so on. NATO has also admitted these accomplishments, but Georgia has a lot other problems to clear up. The most important of all are the reforms we should start and we have not started yet.”

According to Jorjoliani, it should be also noted that Georgia has reached many goals that seemed unachievable in such a short term. “It cannot be said that problem lies in unexecuted reforms. Turkey faces more severe civil right problems than Georgia, but the country is a NATO member. Moreover, there is huge support for NATO in Georgia and when the whole country asks you, it becomes your obligation to meet that request. After the November events, membership of the democratic family has become even more essential. What is the most important after November, the support for NATO remains the same, the alliance is very well-liked in the population. I feel proud when the simple electorate asks opposition leaders about their attitude toward NATO. I feel quite optimistic about the Bucharest Summit,” Jorjoliani said.

According to Kutelia, there are many remaining challenges that Georgia faces, but the western democratic countries should help to alter these challenges into new opportunities. This is not only about Georgia’s NATO membership, there are number of different issues on the international agenda, that should be thoroughly considered. In most of these issues Georgia is a kind of a fulcrum.

First, there is the CFE Treaty. NATO, as an organization, its member countries, particularly United States, are very interested in maintaining this agreement. It is impossible to ratify the adapted CFE Treaty before the settlement of an issue in Georgia, that is the Gudauta base, where Russia stands very firmly, refusing to fulfill its obligations.

Second, in the economic field, there is Russia’s desire to join the World Trade Organization. Everybody is interested to have Russia in this organization because of its size and the opportunity of its markets, but the problem again is that Russia is not fulfilling its obligations toward Georgia.

Third is Energy Security. The only possible alternative route of Caspian hydrocarbons to the European market goes through Georgian territory, at least in the spectrum of today’s geopolitical situation.
As a matter of fact, Georgia’s aspirations toward NATO and Russia’s eagerness to undermine Georgia’s success story, are not only about these two countries. It is a kind of a small geopolitical revolution. If Georgia is punished for its attempts to be a democratic state and for breaking with its Soviet past, and if Russia succeeds, it means Russia will send the strongest ever possible signal to everybody in the South Caucasus and beyond. Notwithstanding the choice of the nation, Russia still rules and labels the region as its sphere of influence. It is a matter of Russia maintaining its superpower image. That is why Russia is heavily investing in it.

Dr. Alexander Rondeli, President of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic And International Studies told GSAC that in Bucharest, Georgia could get something else in place of MAP, some kind of encouraging program, newly designed, especially for Georgia. The Russian factor, its influence on several European countries, and recent interior events have negatively affected Georgia’s prospects for NATO. November events have rhetorically armed everyone who did not want to see Georgia in NATO. Georgia is not performing well enough to outweigh these obstructions on its way to membership. Improvements in civil rights, particularly the judiciary system, is essential, and much needs to be done with regard to independent courts. Some key reforms are under way, but progressing very slowly. The Government has not been capable of fully wiping out the strong inertia of post-soviet mentality. It has achieved much in different fields, but in others it was not able to alter this inertia.

“The exterior factors can be better outweighed when you have yourself done everything right and well,” Rondeli concluded. Apart from that, there is an international context, which also does not play in Georgia’s hands. The USA’s power and popularity has recently diminished, whilst Russia’s has risen.

Dr. Rondeli also noted that if elections are well handled, they may be able to overcome November events and strengthen Georgia’s position, but getting MAP is likely to be postponed, for example, until the end of the year. If the Parliamentary elections are also held well and Georgia fulfills its tasks and does not go off the path of reform, the mistakes can be corrected, among these mistakes was disregard of social discontent—no social anesthesia was administered. There was economic shock therapy, but worsened living conditions and social welfare were not taken into account. “Not only fast and bitter reforms played negative role, but also the international situation. The price of oil rose, the price of wheat rose, the international economic conjuncture changed negatively for Georgia. So, it may be said that many factors played against us, more than others, the Russian blockade,” Rondeli said.

According to Rondeli, the Georgian Government failed to pay attention to many things. More focus should be made on social problems, unemployment and dialog between the citizens and the Government.

“There was a failure in crisis management. Things like this happen in many countries, critical situations arise but they should not result in such ways. So, I think there was a crisis management problem. I think it is good that a powerful man has now been appointed the
Secretary of the Security Council, and the Security Council will again become a powerful body. This means we will have progress in this direction as well,“ Rondeli concluded.

Shota Utiashvili told GSAC that Georgia remains faithful to its principles regarding Euro-Atlantic integration and meeting European standards of which democracy, of which freedom of speech and freedom of elections are part. The January 5 elections will be the logical and very important coronation of these processes. Georgia can do little else. And the friends of Georgia should help. Georgia should do its best to fulfill all those obligations it has imposed on itself, but it cannot do too much to persuade or dissuade anyone in anything. “If NATO membership is the merit-dependent, performance-based, Georgia will meet these standards. After that, Georgia can do nothing more and our friends should guarantee that Russia will not be able to blackmail and block Georgia’s membership in NATO,” Utiashvili said.

Georgia has 5 months to strengthen its position before the Bucharest Summit in April 2008. If it is able to fulfill its tasks well and erase the question marks floating above its democratic development—particularly judicial reform—if it pays more attention to feedback from people and strengthens its crisis management tools, Georgia will have wider latitude to ask for MAP at the Bucharest Summit or later in 2008.

Some analysts think that Georgia is indeed performing well, and that if NATO does not take a positive turn for Georgia, the blame must rest with the international context, primarily Russia and its influence on some NATO member countries. Other analysts think, though not disregarding the international context, that Georgia has made several mistakes and that its success story is marred by essential changes unaccomplished. Hardly anyone disagrees that the upcoming elections will an important sign of Georgia’s development and a good chance to overcome the image left by November events. Some analysts think that democratic, free and fair elections would be a step forward to MAP. The only way to see that is to wait for the elections.