

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

32/2012

November 2012

Report on Georgian Elections 2012

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Introduction

Georgia, a country of 5 million inhabitants, has been continuously important for the development of Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet politics. Birthplace of Joseph Stalin and home to numerous influential elites of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Georgia has been an inherent component of the Russian strategy in the Caucasus, the Near East and the Mediterranean. The collapse of the USSR brought endemic insecurity in the region which was matched by the expansion of Euro-Atlantic structures, as an answer to growing interdependence.² In the aftermath of the 2003 elections and the rise of Saakashvili, Georgia decided to break its link of dependence from Russia and align itself with the priorities of the US foreign policy in the region. Reforms were used as an instrument for that purpose: to stimulate cooperation between Georgia and the West, while reducing the influence of Russia on domestic affairs. The recent elections of October 2012 were a successful test for democracy in the region and a powerful signal toward market reforms and democratic consolidation. The long-term consequences of this political incident still remain to be seen.

Background

Nine years after the Rose Revolution changes in Georgian society are evident. Georgia made important steps toward democratic rule and liberal market standards that transformed her into the most pro-European and pro-Western state in the post-Soviet region. Democratic progress is observable since Saakashvili and his party came to power.

UNM's years in government can be called a "mental revolution" of Georgian society.³ In domestic politics Saakashvili made important steps in combating corruption and creating an effective administrative state. He managed to take control of the police and suppress organized crime.⁴ In economic policy the UNM introduced a dogmatic libertarianism, which has been controversial. According to World Bank experts, Georgia has significantly improved its market institutions, but this has had a negative effect on social welfare and has been heavily criticized by the public.⁵

Many political analysts in Georgia argue that Saakashvili and his UNM party lost popular support due to the President's "arrogant and patronizing" style of government.⁶ His interventionist style of governance alienated a group of citizens, who felt that their interests were better served by an alliance with Moscow. The Russo-Georgian war was seen by many as the last straw in a sequence of events that jeopardized Georgian security and territorial integrity.

While the core of Saakashvili's reforms aimed at stabilizing his own power, it is clear that the young pro-Western leaders of the UNM introduced many significant changes in public management and redefined the relationship between state and society. Even the prison torture scandal, which has been decisive for the election outcome, indicates that the Georgian society has reviewed its priorities. Human rights issues are now very important in evaluation of government performance.⁷ Higher living standards in Georgia have now made human rights protection a priority.

Ivanishvili and his Promise of Leadership

While voters punished UNM for its painful reforms and outrageous scandals, they elected a politically inexperienced billionaire,

¹Theocharis Grigoriadis is the coordinator, and Sofia Saridi with Dimitrios Moschos are interns of the ELIAMEP Program in Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies.

²Amanda Paul and Zaur Shiriyev, Georgia's future: between Euro-Atlantic aspirations and geopolitical realities, *European Policy Centre*, September 27 2012.

³Gia Nodia, "Georgia's election: lesson and prospect" *openDemocracy.net publishes*, October 15, 2012.

⁴Coffey Luke, "Saakashvili legacy – Founding father of democratic Georgia" *Washington Post* November 1 2012.

⁵Rubin Eric, "U.S.-Georgia Relations after the Georgian Parliamentary Elections" US State Department Report, October 24 2012.

⁷Gia Nodia, "Moral Certainty and Political Choice", *Tabula*, October 25, 2012.

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who lacks a clear political philosophy. Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is also known as Boris (his previous Russian name), belongs to the oligarchic school of post-Soviet business. He has had an extensive activity in the area of charities directed to rural populations and has been able to gain the support of the Russian-influenced intelligentsia of Tbilisi. According to his own words, he does not have a long-term horizon in politics and his intention is to further political and economic change in Georgia. His critics underscore his relations with Russian political elites and business.

Ivanishvili initially supported the Georgian government, which came to power after 2004. Nevertheless, since October 2011 he has become actively involved in Georgian politics as an opposition member. Ivanishvili's Party "Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia" was officially founded on 21 April 2012.

The Party "Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia"

The party "Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia", founded and funded by Ivanishvili, is a pluralist group of parties, including politicians that were formerly supporting Saakashvili (e.g. the Conservatives and Irakli Alasania, current Defense Minister). The new cabinet has been approved by every major coalition member. In economic policy, the new government is not different from its predecessor. Nevertheless, Ivanishvili government is also planning an agricultural fund in order to assist poorer farmers, combined with promises for a significant pension increase.⁸

Ivanishvili's party managed to unite all the factions of Georgian opposition, which represented large portions of Georgian society, tired and disappointed by Saakashvili.⁹ The Greek minority in Georgia has had quite an ambiguous stance. Its political orientation was a subject of residence, age, or even language. Greek communities residing in the South of the country, together with young Greeks supported Saakashvili, while Russian-speaking members of the Greek Diaspora in Georgia voted in their majority for Ivanishvili.

Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate

The Georgian church has had an active position in domestic affairs, with Patriarch Ilia II being the most popular public figure. The church took an openly neutral stance to the elections, while encouraging voters to participate.¹⁰ Saakashvili was engaged in funding the Church's activities (22.8 million lari were transferred to the Georgian Orthodox Church annually) and he received political support from the Patriarch in return.

But in the backstage, the tensions between the Church and the last government simmered. A series of laws promoting religious freedom and equality caused a serious disagreement between state and church officials. Simultaneously, hardcore orthodox groups despised Saakashvili of his socially liberal policy.

The improvement of Russo-Georgian relations has been long sought and lobbied by the Church. This was an additional reason for the decision of the Georgian Orthodox Church to support Ivanishvili.

Electoral Procedure and Results

In the first hours, there was no clear winner of the elections. Yet President Saakashvili finally recognized the opposition's victory. Georgian Dream took 54.97% of the votes, against 40.34 of the UNM.¹¹ The seats in the new Parliament are split between the Georgian Dream (85 seats) and the UNM (65 seats).¹² However, the geographical allocation of the votes creates concerns. In the map above, it is evident that polarization exists between central regions that voted for Ivanishvili and western areas and areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, voting for Saakashvili.

The southern borderline, supporting Saakashvili is largely inhabited by Armenians and Azerbaijanis, which President Saakashvili has had great influence to (he was called "half-Armenian"). In contrast to this, Ivanishvili had not adequately reached the minorities. Saakashvili had gathered political support in the West due to his plans for building a new business city that he would name Lazika.¹³ Ivanishvili nevertheless scrapped such plans after his electoral victory.

⁸ Janashia Eka, "Ivanishvili's political team starts pre-election battle in Georgia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 27, 2012.

⁹ Shestakov Yevgeny, "What opposition victory in Tbilisi means for Russia" *Valdai Discussion Club*, October 12, 2012.

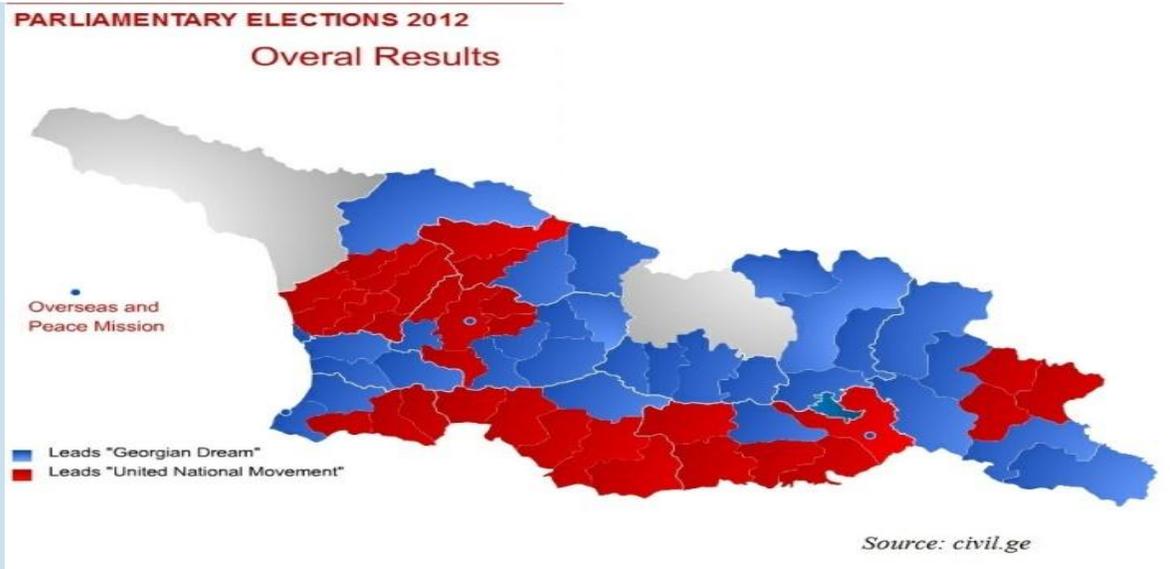
¹⁰ Ellen Barry, "Church's Muscle Helped Propel President's Rivals to Victory in Georgia", *The New York Times*, October 13, 2012.

¹¹ Central Election Commission of Georgia, "Summary Protocol of the Elections of the Parliament of Georgia of October 1, 2012", October 19, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Saakashvili Plans 'New Large City' on Black Sea Coast", *Civil Georgia*, December 04, 2011.

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Foreign Policy

Monitoring conducted by the OSCE, EU, the Caucasus Elections Watch and others proved that elections were carried out fairly and transparently. Russia has welcomed the election results, hoping for better times in bilateral relations. The EU applauded the elections, while Barack Obama referred to them “another milestone in Georgia's democratic development”.

In the light of Ivanishvili's victory, it was reasonable for the West to think that Georgia would abandon its clearly pro-Western policies set by the previous government; a commitment to the improvement of Russo-Georgian relations is explicitly mentioned in Ivanishvili's agenda.

Despite initial disagreements, both President Saakashvili and Prime Minister Ivanishvili confirmed that Georgia will continue to move closer to NATO and the EU. The foreign policy path of the previous government will be followed also in the future. The new government is expected to setup a more realist and less polarized foreign policy, which implies Georgia's further integration to Western institutions but not at the expense of its relations with Russia. Ivanishvili's statement that Washington D.C. will be his first destination abroad sends a clear message of the newly formed government's priorities.

Similarly, Ivanishvili's leadership recognizes the urgent need to improve ties with Russia, Georgia's strongest neighbor. This is a necessary condition for the country's long-awaited stability and poverty reduction.

Conclusion

To sum up, the October elections turned a new page in Georgia's history. A change in government under conditions of constitutional order and institutional continuity enhances the country's perspective towards democracy and reform. However, it is still questioned whether democracy will be consolidated in the long-run. The improvement of Russo-Georgian relations will have a tremendously positive effect on US-Russian relations and the development of common initiatives for global peace.

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