

ELECTION ANALYSIS Georgia

“SNAP” TRANSPARENCY

by Michael Svetlik



Voter gets thumb stamped at January 4 Georgian election.

With the collapse of communism, people across the former Soviet Union initially accepted the imperfections of their nascent democratic systems. Simply conducting an election was of primary concern and the quality of the process and the integrity of the outcome was secondary. More recently, the electorate has demanded greater accountability.

During the past year, national elections were conducted in all three trans-Caucasus countries. Presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Armenia in February and May respectively; presidential elections took place in Azerbaijan in mid-October and parliamentary elections in Georgia followed in early November. Domestic and international observers noted improvement in the legal framework for elections and credited authorities with greater efficiency in administration. Yet the continued lack of transparency and impartiality of the election process casts doubt on the integrity of election outcomes.

The January 4 “snap” Presidential elections in Georgia represent a valuable lesson to government authorities, policy makers and democratic activists in the region. The success of this extraordinary election, prompted by Eduard Shevardnadze’s resignation in November following large protests, demonstrates that political will and commitment to the rule of law are essential to re-building public trust in democracy.

In late November, interim authorities led by Parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze made appointments to the Central Election Commission (CEC) to replace the presidential appointees that resigned due to irregularities in the November 2 elections. These included a new chairman of the commission, Zurab Cheribashvili, former head of the nation’s leading domestic election observer organization.

The newly formed CEC, constitutionally mandated to conduct new presidential elections within 45 days of the president’s resignation, quickly began to correct the problems which plagued past Georgian elections. The CEC instituted an ambitious plan to improve the quality of voters’ lists that were widely criticized in the November election as incomplete. They devised a system whereby voters registered directly with election officials in precinct polling stations. In ten days, active voter registration

efforts yielded approximately 1.7 million registered voters. Same-day registration was allowed as a stop-gap measure so voters who did not participate in the active registration drive were able to cast ballots.

Additional improvements included enhanced transparency and professionalism in election management; timely resolution of pre-election appeals and efforts to increase participation of national minorities with the printing of bilingual ballot papers.

Citizens of Georgia turned out for the January 4 election in record numbers, responding with enthusiasm to the new candidates and at the urging of the opposition. According to official CEC figures, voter turnout was 85%. Only in the separatist-leaning autonomous republic of Adjara, which threatened to boycott the election, was voter turnout low.



CEC results center in Tbilisi.

Yet what the election enjoyed in terms of active participation and improved transparency, it sorely lacked in competitiveness. Of the five candidates on the ballot, only the reform-minded opposition leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, was a serious contender with President-elect Saakashvili garnering 96% of the votes. Some irregularities were reported in specific regions of the country, but

were not as systematic and were on a lesser scale than the November elections.

Domestic and international observers hailed the January 4 election as a clear improvement over past electoral contests. Georgian authorities were both lauded and encouraged by international observers to address the continued political disparity in the election administration and the lack of separation between party and State structures.

President-elect Saakashvili inherits a shattered economy and a national budget requiring considerable foreign assistance. He has vowed to mount an anti-corruption effort and foster economic development, but short-term results to satisfy the public’s high expectations will be difficult.

The true test of Georgia’s renewed commitment to democracy will be the re-run of the parliamentary elections in March. New authorities must nurture a truly competitive political system in which multiple political forces vie for public support. Thus will Georgia be able to distinguish itself as an earnest liberal democracy in which an open, competitive and credible election process is essential. **■**

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