



**Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC**

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The Georgian Local Elections

- When Zurab Zhvania and I spoke at CSIS in February we made some predictions, some of which proved correct
- Our message to the U.S. Administration and Congress at the time was that we want the local elections to be held on time. Thanks to U.S. interference—an example of good interference—the elections were held on time, although long overdue
- Elections are important because all democracies must be “tested” by elections; unfortunately these elections did not go very well
- The National Movement received almost 25% of the vote in Tbilisi, and together with Zhvania’s group, which received about 9%, we received the largest share of the votes
- In the outlying regions we received most of the votes in a few of the large municipalities
- This election is regarded as the litmus test before parliamentary elections
- Anticipation is rising in Georgia because people know that Shevardnadze’s term is coming to an end. We are now in a transition period

Problems with the Elections

- The National Movement is complaining about the results of these elections because the elections were fraught with problems
- On the eve of the elections we discovered that the list of voters was missing. We received documents showing that some people were registered to vote in hundreds of different places—from the beginning it was clear that the elections would have problems
- I did not get a single minute of airtime on state television
- We went to President Shevardnadze and the Central Election Commission (CEC) and asked them to postpone the elections for one week in order to fix the problems, to reinstate the lists and remove the duplicates
- We spoke with them four times, but Shevardnadze refused to postpone the elections and promised to guarantee law and order on election day
- We agreed, but adopted a resolution that if there were complaints, then the CEC would reopen the ballot boxes and begin a recount
- On election day many polling stations opened later than they were supposed to
- Most of the people that were registered by major polls as our supporters were turned away—they were told that they were not registered at the polling stations
- In some places where it was clear that the National Movement was doing well, polling stations were suddenly closed
- In Zugdidi, where our candidate was set to win, the local paramilitary leader, the so-called partisan leader who became famous for breaking up our rallies in Western Georgia, showed up at polling stations and said that he would shut down polling stations—no one did anything to stop him



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- Early in the morning in Rustavi, where we had about 70% support, 40 men armed with Kalishnikovs stole and destroyed ballot boxes
- All of the ballots in one of Tbilisi's polling stations actually disappeared—nobody knows where they went, except that the votes registered from that station showed the National Movement winning only 2% of the vote while our main rival won approximately 60%
- These violations were not officially registered, although they certainly took place

Attempts to Make the Elections Free and Fair

- There were many “duplicate voters,” who were traveling between polling stations in mini-vans and voting more than once
- When my supporters asked the police to intervene, the police refused to help. In some cases policemen accompanied these duplicate voters.
- In one case when a polling station in the center of Tbilisi was closed early, my supporters gathered outside and began demanding that they be allowed to exercise their constitutional right to vote—the fact that they did this really surprised me, but also made me very happy
- In some cases, when polling stations were raided, I sent about 5,000 people to physically protect the polling stations and the ballots

Analysis of the Elections

- The official voter turnout was about 50%, but when taking into account the fact that so many people were turned away and the fact that the voter lists were exaggerated, I would say the real voter turnout was about 75-80%
- The real turnout for presidential elections in 2000 was about 20%--this increase is telling of the feelings within Georgia
- Soon after the counting began, it became clear that the National Movement won in eight out of ten polling stations in Tbilisi, and in the two that we lost in—which normally receive 200-300 voters—about 900 extra people showed up to vote, and we ended up losing by 800 votes
- Next morning government meetings began by exchanging blame for the success of the National Movement. Complaints were also made that the government did not sufficiently explain to the people Georgia the dangerousness of the National Movement

Smear Campaign Against Saakashvili

- The government paid for commercials where Zhvania and I were depicted as Hitler; the commercial claimed that we are fascists and ultra-nationalists
- In Armenian populated areas, where we won the elections, the government ran ads saying that I am part of an international Turkish conspiracy to bring Meskhetian Turks there to replace the Armenian population
- The government also told Azerbaijani voters that I refer to them as Tatars and that I am an extreme nationalist and will seek to deport the Azerbaijani citizens
- On state television, on the eve of elections, two so-called prominent intellectuals who are notorious supporters of Shevardnadze, gave a speech saying that Shevardnadze's term should be extended because he is ethnic Georgian, while Zhvania and myself are not



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- On May 28 Shevardnadze gave a speech in which he claimed that Zhvania and I are ultra-nationalists and close to being fascists—he compared me to LePen in France

The National Movement's Campaign

- We were the only party that ran a campaign partly directed at minorities—not because of the government's smear campaign, but because I genuinely believe that minorities should be integrated into the government
- I made a speech to Azerbaijani voters in Azeri—we won nearly 100% of the Azerbaijani vote in Tbilisi
- I made a speech in Ukrainian to the Ukrainian voters
- We were also the only party to run television ads in Russian for Russian speaking voters
- Government propaganda that attempted to depict us negatively was not so effective in major cities, but in rural areas it might have been very effective
- The policy of playing up ethnic tensions in the campaign period is very dangerous because Georgia does not have any integrating policy for the minorities and there are no attempts made to make their lives any easier
- Politicizing the minorities is a very anti-modern and dangerous rhetoric
- My main message is that there is no stability without democracy—Georgia cannot become an authoritarian state
- The political culture in Georgia is quite mature, and as we saw during the recent elections, people will not allow the state to become authoritarian

Reemergence of Para-Military Groups

- Right now there is a reemergence of private armies and para-military groups—the state is giving up part of its inherent functions and as a result private groups taking over parts of major state functions
- These groups could easily be neutralized if there is enough political will
- For example the governor of Kvemo-Kartli, Levan Mamaladze, is known to have created armed groups, and if he were fired, the groups would disband within hours
- We are returning to a stage of our development that we hardly survived

President Shevardnadze

- President Shevardnadze said the fact that his party (the CUG) did so poorly is proof that the elections were free and fair
- The truth, however, is that there were other parties backing Shevardnadze
- Shevardnadze lacks the qualifications to be a dictator and I think he knows it
- He tried to solve all of his problems through the Train and Equip (T&E) Program and promised that the U.S. presence would bring benefits to the people
- Since the average Georgian will not see any benefits in the short time, this announcement could hurt me and other politicians who are strong proponents of close ties with the U.S.
- People need assurances that they can change their government democratically. The only alternative to democracy is chaos and failed institutions, with para-military groups taking charge



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- The main challenge to Georgia in the years to come is to keep the political framework in place to allow for peaceful transition of power, and to bring reformist forces into the parliament and the presidency
- We still support Shevardnadze in terms of foreign policy; we would still support him generally if he had kept up the internal democratic reforms

Outside Observers of the Elections

- We are receiving more and more criticism from the European Parliament
- Shortly after a delegation from the European Parliament was in Tbilisi, the European Parliament adopted resolutions against Georgia.
- A Council of Europe observers group produced a report that went beyond any previous criticism of Georgia
- Shevardnadze's response was to limit foreign grants, and not always allow foreign organizations to make grants to Georgian NGO's that criticize the Georgian government—he even went as far to say that those grants could be funding terrorists
- Legislation to limit and control foreign grants to Georgian NGO's is in the pipeline and could be adopted
- The former minister of Finance, Zurab Noghaideli, said foreign grants could not be limited, and that it would be anti-democratic. It has already happened in Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Ukraine, but it would not be acceptable for Georgia
- Shevardnadze's reaction to the European statement criticizing Georgian treatment of religious minorities was that it was based on information supplied by Zhvania and myself and that we were badmouthing Georgia to visiting European delegations—this continued with Communist style propaganda which said we do not love our own country
- There is only one solution for stability—democracy and rule of law

My Political Philosophy

- I am accused of being a radical. Yes, I am a radical in my demands for rule of law, and I will not compromise on that. I am also radical in fighting corruption and do not accept Shevardnadze's claim that the fight against corruption must begin slowly and will take several years, and that we should start with "softer" forms of corruption like smuggling, and only then move on to government officials
- This kind of radicalism is acceptable in any Western country
- Our prescription for stability is to channel people's frustrations through democratic channels
- Concerning foreign affairs, it is obvious that Georgia's political direction is integration with Europe and the United States—we have no desire to change this, and I do not think anyone can change this
- Many people blame me for saving Shevardnadze last fall, when there were 30-40,000 people in front of the parliament building demanding Shevardnadze's resignation. Once the interior and security ministers resigned, I was the only person the crowd would listen to, and I asked them to go home

After these recent local elections a crowd gathered again in front of the chancery demanding Shevardnadze's resignation, and again I asked them to disperse. I left the scene, but many of the



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people did not, and I heard that Shevardnadze called an emergency meeting of his security cabinet to discuss the threat posed by the crowd.