



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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The Implications of Georgian Local Elections

by Tomasz Sikorski

The victory of the ruling United National Movement in the local elections in Georgia on 30 May 2010 entrenches the dominance of President Saakashvili's camp and underscores the political fragmentation of the opposition. The course of the elections confirms the need for stronger European Union support for democratic reforms in Georgia.

According to preliminary results, the ruling United National Movement (UNM) won 61.4% of votes throughout the country. The two most important opposition parties—the Alliance for Georgia headed by Irakli Alasania and the Christian Democrat Union of Georgia—won 12% and 11.6% of the votes, respectively. Direct elections for the mayor of Tbilisi were won by incumbent Gigi Ugulava supported by President Saakashvili (with 55.2% backing), with voter turnout countrywide at 49%.

OSCE observers described the elections as generally complying with democratic standards, although the following incidents were recorded: breaches of electoral procedure, attempts to falsify results (adding ballot cards to boxes at local polling stations), administrative pressure on opposition candidates (threats, pressure to abandon the race) and use of public funds for the UNM campaign.

These local elections were the first elections in Georgia since the August 2008 war with Russia and the last ones to be held before the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2012 and 2013, respectively. The opposition expected to harness Saakashvili's large negative electorate, which is disappointed with the president's policy with regard to Russia, his radical economic reforms and the authorities' numerous controversial decisions, such as blowing up the statue commemorating Georgian Red Army soldiers on 21 December 2009. The opposition failed to win the trust of voters, however, with the failure largely due to its internal quarrelling, the hysterical tone of its attacks on the authorities and, finally, the talks conducted by some opposition members with Russia (seen by many Georgians as treason). Even the recently established Alliance for Georgia with its conciliatory rhetoric performed below expectations, although it did manage to consolidate its position on the political stage. The low voter turnout was caused by Georgians' weariness with prolonged political disputes and common distaste for the establishment. Opponents of the president are often distrustful of the opposition as well.

The elections have resulted in a stronger political position of President Saakashvili and his political camp. Worthy of note is also the very good result obtained by Ugulava in Tbilisi, traditionally seen as a bastion of the opposition. This will make it easier for Saakashvili to promote Ugulava's candidature as his successor—presidential elections are scheduled for 2013 and the incumbent president will not be able to run. At the same time, a long crisis should be expected within the opposition, which for the next two years will not be able to assume power.

The Saakashvili camp's favorable electoral results enhance its legitimacy to launch reforms. There is a risk, however, that the presidential camp's preponderant political dominance will lead to stronger authoritarian temptations. Respect for the separation of powers into three branches of government continues to be problematic in Georgia, while civic society there is weak. During the electoral campaign, the pro-government media attacked the opposition in a demagogical manner, and this culminated in the 13 March broadcast on Imedi television of a report about an alleged Russian invasion and treason of a part of the opposition.

Under the circumstances, more intensive EU support within the Eastern Partnership for civic society development in Georgia seems advisable. During negotiations on an association agreement between Georgia and the EU that are likely to begin this year, the Union should put pressure on the Georgian authorities to continue political reforms so as to reinforce the country's unstable democratic system, while Poland in turn should press for maintaining a strong EU political presence in the South Caucasus.