



Georgia's January 2008 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications

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Summary

This report discusses the campaign and results of Georgia's January 5, 2008, presidential election and implications for Russia and U.S. interests. The election took place after the sitting president, Mikheil Saakashvili, suddenly resigned in the face of domestic and international criticism over his crackdown on political dissidents. Many observers viewed Saakashvili's re-election as marking some democratization progress, but some raised concerns that political instability might endure and that Georgia's ties with NATO might suffer. This report may be updated. Related reports include CRS Report RL33453, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, by (name redacted).

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Background

Political instability in Georgia appeared to worsen in November 2007 after several opposition parties united in a “National Council” that launched demonstrations in Tbilisi, the capital, to demand that legislative elections be held in early 2008 as originally called for instead of in late 2008 as set by the government-dominated legislature. The demonstrations had been spurred by sensational accusations by former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili against President Mikheil Saakashvili (including that Saakashvili ordered him to commit murder). Calls for Saakashvili’s resignation intensified after Okruashvili claimed that he had been coerced by the government to recant the accusations. On November 7, police and security forces forcibly dispersed demonstrators, reportedly resulting in several dozen injuries. Security forces also stormed the independent Imedi (“Hope”) television station, which had aired opposition grievances, and shut it down. Saakashvili declared a state of emergency for 15 days, giving him enhanced powers. He claimed that the demonstrations had been part of a coup attempt orchestrated by Russia, and ordered three Russian diplomats to leave the country.

U.S. and other international criticism of the crackdown may have influenced Saakashvili’s decision to step down as president on November 25, 2007, so that early presidential elections could be held on January 5, 2008, “because I, as this country’s leader, need an unequivocal mandate to cope with all foreign threats and all kinds of pressure on Georgia.”¹ At the same time, he called for a plebiscite on whether to have a spring or fall legislative election and on whether Georgia should join NATO. Legislative Speaker Nino Burjanadze became acting president. She called on prosecutors to drop charges against Imedi. It renewed broadcasts on December 12, and became for a time the main television outlet for opposition candidates in the election (see also below).

The Campaign

Significant amendments to the electoral code were adopted in late November and mid-December to make elections more democratic, including by adding some opposition party representatives to electoral commissions. However, the adoption of new rules shortly before the election sometimes resulted in haphazard implementation, according to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which monitored the electoral process.²

Most observers considered the nomination process for presidential candidates to be inclusive and transparent. Besides Saakashvili, six other candidates were successfully registered (see Table 1). Among the campaign pledges made by the candidates, Saakashvili ran on his claimed record of reducing corruption and crime and improving living conditions, and pledged to further reduce poverty and to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity peacefully. Levan Gachechiladze stated that he would work to create a parliamentary system of rule with a constitutional monarchy, nominate former foreign minister Salome Zourabichvili as the prime minister, and encourage private enterprise and poverty alleviation. Davit Gamqrelidze pledged to consider backing either a

¹ Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), November 8, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950428.

² OSCE. International Election Observation Mission. *Georgia: Extraordinary Presidential Election, 5 January 2008, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, January 6, 2008.

parliamentary system or constitutional monarchy, and to bolster freedom of speech, personal property rights, and an independent judiciary. Shalva Natelashvili pledged to boost social services and called for a parliamentary system. The Harvard-educated Giorgi Maisashvili stressed business creation. All the candidates except Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia and prominent businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili called for Georgia to seek membership in NATO. Sarishvili-Chanturia urged voters to either vote for her or other candidates she favored. Patarkatsishvili called for abolishing the presidency, creating a confederation with a weak central government, and establishing close ties with Russia. He pledged to use his fortune to provide unemployment benefits and some free utilities to the poor.

Mass rallies were prominent in the campaign, and several candidates toured the country. In contrast, Patarkatsishvili faced charges of involvement in a coup attempt linked to the November demonstrations and conducted his campaign from abroad. Most observers considered much of the campaigning as focused on accusations rather than issues. Perhaps the most sensational event of the campaign occurred in late December, when the government released recordings which it claimed incriminated Patarkatsishvili in yet another coup planned for after the election. Patarkatsishvili denied planning a coup and called on journalists to defend him. He also stated that he would step down as a candidate, but later reversed course. Staff at Imedi, which was at least partially owned by Patarkatsishvili, decided to temporarily halt transmissions on December 26.

Results and Assessments

The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) reported that 56.2% of 3.35 million registered voters reportedly turned out and that Saakashvili received enough votes (over 50%) to avoid a legally mandated second round of voting for the top two candidates (preliminary results; see Presidential Election Results). On the plebiscite issues, 77% of voters endorsed Georgia joining NATO and almost 80% supported holding legislative elections in spring 2008. An effort by the government to conduct balloting in Georgia-controlled areas in South Ossetia was denounced by officials in the breakaway region with the claim that almost all residents are citizens of Russia. Saakashvili's performance at the polls benefitted from a growing economy and a boost in social services provided by the government. His pledge of greater efforts to alleviate poverty also may have helped ease some grievances against his rule, according to many observers. The fractiousness of some of the opposition, which could not agree on a single candidate, was a major factor in the results.

A preliminary report by observers from the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the European Parliament (EP) assessed the election as "in essence consistent

Presidential Election Results

Candidate	Percent of Vote
Mikheil Saakashvili	53.47
Levan Gachechiladze	25.69
Badri Patarkatsishvili	07.10
Shalva Natelashvili	06.49
Davit Gamqrelidze	04.20
Giorgi Maisashvili	00.77
Irina Sarishvili	00.16

Note: Saakashvili was nominated by the United National Movement; Gachechiladze by the National Council of nine opposition parties; Gamqrelidze by the New Right Party; Natelashvili by the Labour Party; and Patarkatsishvili, Sarishvili-Chanturia, and Maisashvili by citizens' groups.

Source: Central Electoral Commission, January 13, 2008.

with most ... commitments and standards for democratic elections, [although] significant challenges were revealed....”³ Several positive aspects of the election were listed, including that the race offered a competitive choice of candidates. Negative aspects included “pervasive” violations that were “not conducive to a constructive, issue-based election campaign.” These included the use of government offices to support Saakashvili, “substantiated” instances in which officials harassed opposition campaigners, allegations that state employees were ordered to vote for Saakashvili, the use of social services to gain support for Saakashvili, and a tendency toward pro-Saakashvili bias by the CEC in resolving complaints.⁴ The monitors viewed the vote count more negatively, with a significant number assessing it as bad or very bad. The preliminary report argued that electoral abuses varied from region to region, appeared often due to incompetence or local fraud, and stopped short of organized and systematic manipulation. The CEC and the courts eventually invalidated or corrected the results in 18 of 3,511 voting precincts.

Among other assessments of the election, the prestigious Georgian NGO, Fair Elections, reported on January 10 that its exit polling at 400 precincts appeared to indicate that Saakashvili may have won enough votes to avoid a runoff, even if there were voting irregularities.⁵ U.S. analyst Charles Fairbanks, however, argued on January 16, 2008, that the balloting reported for Saakashvili was inflated, so that it was “unlikely” that he won in the first round.⁶ Although no Russian election observers were invited, the Russian Foreign Ministry asserted on January 6, 2008, that the election “could hardly be called free and fair,” including because “the campaign was accompanied with the extensive use of administrative resources, unconcealed pressure on opposition candidates and rigid limits on their access to financial and media resources.”⁷

Implications for Georgia and Saakashvili

Many observers regarded the relative peacefulness of the election campaign (compared to the November 2007 violence) as a positive sign that at least fitful democratization might be preserved in Georgia. Among other possible signs of progress toward democratization and stability, Saakashvili in his inaugural address on January 20, 2008, pledged to facilitate greater opposition participation in political decision-making. Some analysts also suggest that opposition parties and politicians might have benefitted from the campaign by becoming better known and might gain votes in upcoming legislative elections, thereby enhancing political pluralism. These observers suggest that opposition parties and politicians will soon shift from protesting the results of the presidential race to campaigning for a prospective May 2008 legislative election. In the economic realm, these observers suggest that Saakashvili’s re-election reassured international investors that

³ A preliminary report by observers from the National Democratic Institute, a U.S.-based NGO, similarly suggested that “key aspects of this election were in line with democratic principles. But there were also flaws ... that should be addressed to enhance the integrity of future elections.” *Statement of the NDI Election Observer Delegation to Georgia’s 2008 Presidential Election*, January 7, 2008. According to a preliminary statement by observers from the International Republican Institute, another U.S.-based NGO, the election “broadly met international standards,” but they called for reforms regarding voter lists and for judicial impartiality. *Preliminary Statement: Georgia’s Election Broadly Meets International Standards: Technical Improvements Needed*, January 6, 2008. See also comments by Kenneth Wollack and Jim Kolbe, Hudson Institute, January 16, 2008.

⁴ The NGO Transparency International’s Georgia office alleged that United National Movement offices and activists had distributed government vouchers for utilities and medications to pro-Saakashvili citizenry.

⁵ *BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit*, January 10, 2008.

⁶ Talk at the Hudson Institute, January 16, 2008.

⁷ *ITAR-TASS*, January 6, 2008.

Georgia has a stable investment climate, although boosted social spending could increase short-term inflation.⁸

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe (COE) on January 6 urged opposition politicians to eschew “immature” rabble-rousing and to “show responsibility, political maturity and respect for the democratic process” by working through constitutional procedures to address electoral irregularities.⁹ Thousands of people reportedly turned out on January 13 and January 20 to peacefully protest against what they considered a fraudulent election. Gachechiladze and other leaders of the National Council asserted that Saakashvili did not win enough votes to avoid a runoff, where he would have faced a single opponent (Gachechiladze).

Many observers argue that Saakashvili’s electoral victory with 53% of the vote contrasts sharply with the 96% of the vote he won in 2004 and illustrates that public trust in his governance has declined. One Georgian analyst has suggested, however, that despite this decline in public trust, many citizens remembered the disorder of past months and years and were fearful of voting for opposition candidates who promised radical political and economic changes if elected. The risk of disorder could greatly increase if public trust further declines as the result of a tainted prospective May 2008 legislative election.¹⁰

Saakashvili’s win appeared to be a further blow to Russia’s hopes of restoring its influence in Georgia, according to many observers. These observers also raise concerns that Saakashvili’s campaign pledge to soon unify Georgia (although he called for peaceful measures) could contribute to further tensions with Russia. In his inaugural address, however, Saakashvili attempted to reassure Russia that Georgia was intent on repairing bilateral ties. One Tajik analyst has suggested that Saakashvili’s re-election provides a positive example to reform-minded politicians in Russia and other Soviet successor states and threatens non-reformist governments in these states.¹¹

Implications for U.S. Interests

On November 8, 2007, the U.S. State Department welcomed President Saakashvili’s call for early presidential elections and a plebiscite on the timing of legislative elections. At the same time, it urged Saakashvili to relinquish emergency power and to “restore all media broadcasts” to facilitate a free and fair election, and urged all political factions to “maintain calm [and] respect the rule of law.” Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza visited Tbilisi on November 11-13 with a letter from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that listed these and other proposals “to restore [the] momentum of democratic reform” in Georgia, highlighting U.S. interest in Georgia’s fate. He argued that while in the past the United States had focused on Georgia as a conduit for oil and gas pipelines to the West and on security assistance, “today what makes Georgia a top tier issue for the U.S. government is democracy.” He held extensive talks with government and opposition politicians to urge them to moderate their mutual accusations and to

⁸ *ITAR-TASS*, January 7, 2008; Ana Jelenkovic, “Georgia: Presidential Election,” *Eurasia Group*, January 4, 2008.

⁹ Council of Europe. Press releases - Secretary General. *Post-Election Period Is a Test of Political Maturity for Georgian Politicians: Statement by Terry Davis*, January 7, 2008.

¹⁰ *CEDR*, January 7, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950088; January 22, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950043; *Spiegel* (Hamburg), January 7, 2008.

¹¹ *CEDR*, January 7, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950069; “Georgia: Presidential Election.”

make compromises necessary for democratic progress. He also stressed that “the United States remains a firm supporter [of] Georgia’s NATO aspirations,” and called on unnamed NATO allies to await further political developments in Georgia before deciding whether or not the country is eligible for a Membership Action Plan (MAP).¹² Some observers have suggested that NATO’s possible consideration of a MAP for Georgia may well be delayed beyond the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, Romania, for reasons that include assessing Georgia’s performance in holding a prospective May 2008 legislative election.

Just after the January 5 balloting, the State Department “congratulated” the people of Georgia for an election that many international observers considered “was in essence consistent with most OSCE and COE commitments and standards.” However, the State Department also raised concerns about reported electoral violations and urged that they be thoroughly investigated and remedied. U.S. ambassador to Georgia John Tefft likewise appeared cautious when he stated on January 10 that the United States had not yet reached an “official political assessment” of the election, so had not congratulated a winner.¹³ After the CEC announced the final election results, President Bush on January 14 telephoned Saakashvili to congratulate him, and dispatched U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez to the inauguration. Some opposition supporters in Georgia criticized the United States for recognizing Saakashvili’s win, perhaps reflecting some potential increase in anti-Americanism, but at an opposition protest at the U.S. Embassy on January 22, only one of the parties involved in the National Council participated.

Many in Congress long have supported democratization and other assistance to Georgia, as reflected in hearings and legislation. The 110th Congress (P.L. 110-17) urged NATO to extend a Membership Action Plan for Georgia and designated Georgia as eligible to receive security assistance under the program established by the NATO Participation Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-447). Indicating ongoing interest in Georgia’s reform progress, on December 13, 2007, the Senate approved S. Res. 391, which urged the U.S. President to publically back free and fair elections in Georgia. In introducing the resolution, Senator Richard Lugar averred that he was “a strong friend of the Georgian people,” and that the resolution indicated “our strong hopes that ... Georgia will return to the democratic path and embrace a free and fair election process.” He also urged Georgia to facilitate the work of international election monitors, particularly those from the OSCE.¹⁴ Representative Alcee Hastings was appointed as Special Coordinator by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office to lead a mission of nearly 500 short-term observers who monitored the January 5 election. The day after the election, Representative Hastings reportedly stated that he viewed the election as a “viable expression of free choice of the Georgian people,” but he also cautioned that Georgia’s “future holds immense challenges” because of the high degree of mistrust and polarization in Georgian society.¹⁵ Similarly, former Representative Jim Kolbe, who led a delegation from the International Republican Institute, evaluated the election as broadly free and fair, but called for further reforms.¹⁶

¹² *U.S. Fed News*, November 12, 2007; *U.S. Fed News*, November 13, 2007.

¹³ U.S. Department of State. Press Statement. *Georgia: Presidential Election*, January 7, 2008; *Reuters*, January 14, 2008.

¹⁴ *Congressional Record*, December 6, 2007, pp. S14856-7; December 13, 2007, p. S15571.

¹⁵ *VOA News: Observers Say Georgia’s Election Was Fair*, January 6, 2008.

¹⁶ Talk at Hudson Institute, January 16, 2008.

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